

ALTERNATIVE COMICS

AN EMERGING LITERATURE

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AN ART OF TENSIONS

THE OTHERNESS OF COMICS READING

Of course we can now reach multitudes of children and semi-illiterate adults with images rather than with cultivated language. But should we? Any degradation of language is a potential threat to civilization.

—Fredric Wertham, “Comics in Education”

I've been writing all along and I've been doing it with pictures.

—Jack Kirby, Interview with Ben Schwartz

To posit comics as a literary form—and alternative comics in particular as a wellspring of notable literary work—may seem question-begging, given the traditional critical view of comics as a subliterate and juvenile diversion that anticipates or preempts the experience of “real” reading. Despite the recent groundswell in multidisciplinary word/image studies, this damaging view of comics is still alive and kicking in some quarters, where classist concerns about the cultural provenance of comics are reinforced by assumptions about essential “differences” between communication by text and communication by images. When doubts persist about the terms of readerly engagement with comics, and whether those terms are radically at odds with the teaching of traditional textual literacy, claims about the form’s literary potential are bound to stir skepticism and resistance. Such doubts of course cannot be overborne by assertion, nor even by sheer weight of example—not everyone can be persuaded—but in the interest of clearing the air, it is worth asking, What kind of experience is reading comics? And to what extent does that experience resemble or diverge from the experience of reading traditional written text? How, if

at all, might that experience affect the acquisition of print awareness and literacy?

These questions, though often unstated or taken as already answered, have bedeviled professional research since at least the 1940s and need to be addressed if we are to appreciate comics as a literary form. They are not the sort of questions one conventionally asks about visual art, but they are crucial to ask here, for they bear directly on the claim—my bedrock claim—that comic art is a form of *writing*.

This claim has increasingly found support among critics, as a reaction against the comparison of comics to cinema and other mechanically paced, hence comparatively “passive,” forms of visual communication. Comics, in recent criticism, are not mere visual displays that encourage inert spectatorship but rather texts that require a reader’s active engagement and collaboration in making meaning. Hence Will Eisner’s critique of comics that too slavishly imitate the rapid pacing and narrative fragmentation of cinema (*Graphic Storytelling* 70–73) and Scott McCloud’s insistence that the reader is always the author’s active “accomplice” in constructing the meaning of a comics text (68). From invoking cinema as an upscale, hence flattering, analogy, comics scholars have decisively shifted toward recognizing the specificity of comics as a form, one distinguished from cinema by its own signifying codes and practices.

Comics theory, then, has tardily arrived at a crucial stage, that of dismantling the once-useful cinema/comics analogy.¹ The idea of comics as active *reading* has gained ground in critical conversation, and displaced the once-attractive comparison to film. This shift is politically loaded, of course, underplaying the complexity of audience participation in cinema (how do viewers read a film, anyway?) so as to stress the *difference* of comics—a strategy consistent with what Bart Beaty has called “the search for comics exceptionalism” (“Exceptionalism” 67). Crucial to this search is the (re)invocation of the written text as a more appropriate point of comparison.

Hence McCloud’s grand summation in *Understanding Comics*: the form “offers range and versatility with all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word” (212). McCloud’s

invocation of *intimacy* and *writing* is no mere afterthought: though he seems unconcerned about the materiality of comics (that is, their physical construction as printed objects), McCloud clearly is concerned about their readability. Therefore he privileges their static nature—more precisely, the way they exploit the “juxtaposition” of still images. These are images that *stay*, unlike the successive moments in a film or video as it is being viewed. In that sense the images in comics read more like printed words or characters. A similar emphasis informs other recent formalist studies (e.g., Harvey’s *Art of the Comic Book*, Eisner’s *Graphic Storytelling*), which, along with McCloud, suggest a general critique of cinema as an explanatory template for comics.

Yet it is by no means clear that comics are universally regarded as a *reading* experience. Indeed, the recent insistence on comics-as-reading seems designed to counter a long-lived tradition of professional writing that links comics with illiteracy and the abdication of reading as a civilized (and civilizing) skill. This “anti-comics” tradition, or school, clearly gives vent to assumptions and anxieties about literacy acquisition among the very young (concerns shared with much popular and professional writing about children’s literature). In fact anxiety over comics as an influence on reading, or as “competition” for real reading, dominates the earliest professional writing about the form. The first wave of American academic research about comics, from the 1940s to the mid-1950s, focused persistently on reading skills, reading habits and literacy acquisition (McAllister, “Research” 6–11; Nyberg 8–11; see also Lent, *Comic Strips*, and Zorbaugh). This critical wave resulted from the sudden popularity, indeed ubiquity, of comic books as juvenile entertainment, from the late thirties onward (though newspaper strips raised similar alarms in the popular press decades before—see, for example, Lent, *Pulp Demons* 9–10; Gordon, *Comic Strips* 41–42).

Mirroring popular concerns, the first wave of comic book research stressed the challenge comics posed to school curricula and to traditional notions of literature (both as reading matter and as a sacrosanct cultural patrimony). The field was shared by clinicians, sociologists, and educators, but it was the latter, especially

librarians and English teachers, who dominated the discussion. Common among their writings were: concerns about the damage (optical as well as psychological) supposedly wrought by comics; invidious distinctions between the entrenched newspaper strip genre and the then less familiar, and certainly less reputable, comic book; assumptions about the *otherness* of comics vis-à-vis true art and culture (which were assumed to be nutritive and socially unifying); and specific suggestions of books that could serve as “substitutes” for, or alternatives to, comic book reading.

Because comic books were overwhelmingly associated with children, these first attempts to theorize about comics reading were inevitably urgent and instrumental in nature. Disinterest was impossible: academic and popular commentators alike (some served in both capacities) were spurred by the general controversy surrounding the medium. Popular and academic conversations about comic books necessarily overlapped and reinforced each other, and some of the most concerned parties—teachers and clinicians, for instance—were positioned so that they had no choice but to respond to arguments from all sides. Thus the early academic writings about comics were transparently political, part of a continuum of political activity that included professional symposia, public testimony, newspaper op-ed writing, mass book burnings, and the drafting of new laws. Because they were occasional in nature, most of these writings have dated badly. Yet, remote as they are, they represent the first kindling of academic interest in comic art. They should not be dismissed offhandedly, for they had lasting effects, both on the political treatment of the comic book medium and on the academic attitude toward comics as a form of writing and reading.

A full survey of this literature lies beyond our scope (therefore readers are referred to Amy Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval* and John Lent et al.’s *Pulp Demons* for helpful overviews). Suffice to say that most academic studies from this period neglect to consider the appeal of the comics form per se, and conceive of it as, at best, a neutral or valueless carrier of themes and ideas better expressed in traditional books. While some writings of the period do acknowledge the hybrid, visual/verbal makeup of comics, this acknowledgment is usually

pejorative: the “pictures” are held to be a detriment because they encourage a “lazy” or passive approach to reading. This position assumes that the verbal aspects of the hybrid text are of no consequence to the (presumably semi-literate) readers, who concentrate wholly on the pictures.

This argument is distilled in Fredric Wertham’s famed *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), which, besides asserting a causal connection between comics consumption and delinquency, also devotes a chapter to the impact of comics on reading skill. Wertham concludes that comics discourage or obstruct reading readiness, that they cause or exacerbate “reading disorders,” and that most habitual comics readers are not “reading” at all but rather engaging in a lazier activity which he christens “picture reading,” meaning “gazing at the successive pictures of the comic book with a minimal reading of printed letters” (126, 139). In Wertham’s view, the ease of comics-gazing “seduces” children into mere picture reading, drawing them away from the more valuable activity of decoding written text. Wertham would later coin the phrase “linear dyslexia” to describe the “inability to sustain proper reading of whole lines . . . and of whole pages” that he believed followed inevitably from such extensive picture reading. He would also attack comics’ visual/verbal nature by explicitly connecting written literacy with cultural inheritance, thusly: “[I]t took thousands of years to develop from communication by images to the abstract reading and writing process which is one of the foundations of civilization. . . . Any degradation of language is a potential threat . . .” (“Comics and Education” 19–20).

This view, so forcefully articulated by Wertham, still colors discussion of comics in the literary sphere, where, as Adam Gopnik has pointed out, comics continue to be regarded as an atavistic, indeed primitive and preliterate, form, despite evidence to the contrary (“Comics and Catastrophe” 29–30). Cartoonists’ penchant for using nonstandard or distorted vocabulary, phrasing, and spelling—a habit that depends on the power of pictures to gloss and clarify—has often been adduced as evidence of this preliterate quality, though it arguably reveals quite the opposite: a sophisticated attitude toward language as a sign of

character and context. Although Wertham derided the “faulty” spelling and peculiar “neologisms” of comics, as well as their reliance on “words that are not words at all,” that is, onomatopoeia (*Seduction* 144), prior arguments had already established that word distortion in comics can be a source of meaning, and pleasure, for adult and child readers alike (see Hill 525). Indeed, the playful argot of such comics as George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* and Elzie Segar’s *Popeye* marks a Modernist preoccupation with the fluid exchange between poetic and everyday speech—no less so, one is tempted to say, than *Finnegan’s Wake*. Concern over such “degradation” of language continues to obstruct the critical reception of comics, even though, properly speaking, this anarchic approach to words should be seen as a creative asset rather than a liability. (As a student of mine once remarked, “I love the way the pictures make the dialogue so *free*.”)

Academic critics of comics throughout the forties and fifties tended to ignore or to condemn the form’s visual/verbal nature, viewing the radical fragmentation of the page and the nonstandard use of language as obstructive rather than enabling. Yet by the early seventies the overall emphasis of the professional literature had begun to shift, from censure to guarded endorsement of comics as an aid to literacy. Indeed the seventies saw a groundswell of interest in comics as instructional tools, a development summed up in 1983 with the appearance of a book titled *Cartoons and Comics in the Classroom*, edited by James L. Thomas. This book, subtitled *A Reference for Teachers and Librarians*, compiles thirty-two articles written by academics, school administrators, classroom teachers, and librarians between 1971 and 1981, articles culled from journals and magazines aimed primarily at educators (for example, *Elementary English*, *School Library Journal*, and *Reading Improvement*). Thomas’s compilation urges the use of comics and instructional cartoons, while inadvertently testifying to the cultural anxieties still surrounding the form: several articles refer approvingly to the comic industry’s self-censoring Code, and the full text of the Code is given as an appendix.

Articles of the sort collected in *Cartoons and Comics in the Classroom* register a tentative enthusiasm for

comic art and share a common argument: the familiarity, accessibility and, in some cases, easy vocabulary of comics make them ideal tools for teaching reading, provided that teachers “focus the students’ attention on the words, not the pictures” (Thomas 258). Comics are held to have a high “motivational value” (161), and articles extolling comics often invoke the popularity of the form, in some cases buttressing this claim with sales figures for comic books. Yet recognition of the unique properties of comics is scant. These studies tend to ignore the distinctive graphic qualities of the comics page in favor of an emphasis on verbal “readability” alone, and recommend classroom activities that focus on the isolation of key words or the analysis of prose, without attention to the visual context.²

Thomas’s book confirmed a change in the prevailing attitude toward comics reading. This change can be traced to various overdetermined, indeed politically fraught, trends in American intellectual life, among them: shifts in academic attitudes toward mass culture, the displacement of media effects research from comics to television, and the entrenchment of holistic or “whole language” approaches to reading pedagogy. These trends conspired to quell anxieties about comics, and indeed to encourage the use of comics and other hybrid texts in reading instruction. Yet, still, the distinctiveness of comic art—its peculiar means of soliciting reader involvement and suggesting meaning—seldom came up for discussion. There remained an underlying consistency between the censorious writings of the forties and fifties and the guarded enthusiasm of the seventies and eighties. This consistency emerges repeatedly in certain rhetorical concessions: comics are designated as strictly utilitarian and are still regarded as distinctly *other* than “great literature.” Yes, they are a time-honored part of American culture, and possibly an aid to reading, but as texts they are too impure, or too aesthetically fragile, to defend except on grounds of usefulness. Scholarship continued to resist comics and, more broadly, the combining of image and text, except as a stopgap for the “reluctant” reader.

In sum, the professional literature reveals two schools of thought about comics reading, both

founded on pragmatic concerns: either comics are effective aids to literacy, because they are “easy”; or comics are poor aids, perhaps even obstacles, to literacy, because they are “easy.” Comics, in short, are either useful as stepping-stones or worse than useless. What both schools neglect is the *specificity* of the comics reading experience. Though comics may assist the acquisition of print literacy, they are by no means interchangeable with conventional reading; on this score the critics of comics as an instructional medium have a point. Yet these detractors err in assuming that the form impedes literacy acquisition because of its simplicity. Rather, we should say that comics are of only particular and limited use as reading aids because of their complexity.

Comics raise many questions about reading and its effects, yet the persistent claims for the form’s simplicity and transparency make it impossible to address these questions productively. Criticism, whether formalist or sociocultural in emphasis, will remain at an impasse as long as comics are seen this way—that is, as long as they are rhetorically constructed as “easy.” In fact comics can be a complex means of communication and are always characterized by a plurality of messages. They are heterogeneous in form, involving the co-presence and interaction of various codes. To the already daunting (and controversial) issue of reading, then, we must add several new complexities, if we are to understand what happens when we read comics.

From a reader’s viewpoint, comics would seem to be radically fragmented and unstable. I submit that this is their great strength: comic art is composed of several kinds of *tension*, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other. If this is so, then comics readers must call upon different reading strategies, or interpretive schema, than they would use in their reading of conventional written text.

The balance of this chapter will engage the fundamental tensions within comics, with emphasis on the kinds of judgment (or suspension of judgment) they demand of readers. I shall concentrate on questions of reader response, in the sense of participation and interpretation, rather than those underlying questions of reading process that properly belong to

empirical study (for example, eye movement, working memory, or graphophonic competence). My aim is not to set forth an empirical model of comics reading but rather to establish the complexity of the form by broadly discussing the kinds of mixed messages it sends even to the most experienced of readers. This discussion will serve as a prospectus for the collective task of theorizing reader response in comics in a more general way.

Such theorizing, I will argue, must grapple with four tensions that are fundamental to the art form: between *codes* of signification; between the *single image* and the *image-in-series*; between narrative *sequence* and *page surface*; and, more broadly, between reading-as-experience and the text as material *object*. To demonstrate these tensions, I will draw on a range of examples, including alternative and mainstream, children’s and adults’, and European and American comics.

1. CODE VS. CODE (“WORD” VS. “IMAGE”)

Definitions of comics commonly (though not universally) depend on the co-presence and interplay of image and written text. Some critics regard this interplay as a clash of opposites: the image’s transparency versus the written text’s complexity. McCloud, for instance, though his own definition deemphasizes words, insists on this contrast: he speaks of pictures as *received* information, in contrast to words, whose meanings must be *perceived* (49). Such a distinction posits a struggle between passive and active experience, that is, between inert spectatorship and committed reading. By this argument, comics depend on a dialectic between what is easily understood and what is less easily understood; pictures are open, easy, and solicitous, while words are coded, abstract, and remote.

Yet in comics word and image approach each other: words can be visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words. In brief, the written text can function like images, and images like written text. Comics, like other hybrid texts, collapse the word/image

dichotomy: visible language has the potential to be quite elaborate in appearance, forcing recognition of pictorial and material qualities that can be freighted with meaning (as in, for example, concrete poetry); conversely, images can be simplified and codified to function as a language (see Kannenberg, "Graphic Text" and especially "Chris Ware"). McCloud himself notes this, arguing for comic art in which word and image tend toward each other (47–49, 147–51). This recognition renders McCloud's larger argument incoherent, as it belies his earlier distinction between perceived and received information. The distinction does not hold in any case, for, as Perry Nodelman points out with regard to picture books, "All visual images, even the most apparently representational ones, . . . require a knowledge of learned competencies and cultural assumptions before they can be rightly understood" (17). Though the image is, as W. J. T. Mitchell says, "the sign that pretends not to be a sign" (*Iconology* 43), it remains a sign nonetheless, "as bound up with habit and convention as any text" (64). Pictures are not simply to be received; they must be decoded.

Still, responding to comics often depends on recognizing word and image as two "different" types of sign, whose implications can be played against each other—to gloss, to illustrate, to contradict or complicate or ironize the other. While the word/image dichotomy may be false or oversimple, learned assumptions about these different codes—written and pictorial—still exert a strong centripetal pull on the reading experience. We continue to distinguish between the function of words and the function of images, despite the fact that comics continually work to destabilize this very distinction. This tension between codes is fundamental to the art form.

A CASE STUDY: WARE'S "I GUESS"

If words can be *drawn*, and images *written*, then the tension between words and images can become quite complex. For example, in "I Guess" (Raw 2:3, 1991, reprinted in Ware, *Quimby*), alternative cartoonist Chris Ware experiments with a radically disjunctive form of verbal/visual interplay: a six-page story that sustains parallel verbal and pictorial

narratives throughout, never quite reconciling one to the other (figs. 5 and 6). In fact "I Guess" [a.k.a. "Thrilling Adventure Stories"] seems to tell two different tales. Its visuals pay homage to traditional superhero stories, in a slickly parodic style inspired by the 1930s and 1940s work of such artists as Joe Shuster (*Superman*) and C. C. Beck (*Captain Marvel*); its written text, on the other hand, consists of an ostensibly autobiographical reminiscence, in which a narrator recalls unsettling childhood experiences. Ware never subordinates one tale to the other, but instead juxtaposes word and image in suggestive counterpoint. The iconography of the superhero genre informs and deepens the autobiographical narrative, while the autobiography invests the clichés of the superhero with a peculiar resonance, inviting the reader to reconsider the genre's psychological appeal. Thus the interplay of the two suggests a third, more comprehensive meaning that the reader must construct through inference. As Gene Kannenberg Jr. argues, in a cogent and useful reading of Ware, this "third field of interpretation" captures the emotional conflict within the narrator himself, effectively "reproduc[ing] a psychological state upon the page" ("Ware" 185–86).

Ware's pictorial narrative, involving a conflict between a costumed superman and a mad scientist, parodies early superhero comics with some care, distilling many of the graphic and thematic hallmarks of the genre in its commercial heyday (its Golden Age, in fan parlance). Yet his coolly postmodern graphics exaggerate the cartoon simplicity of Shuster and Beck; he flattens the genre's fervid romanticism into rigid poses, embalming it. His meticulous rendering, lacking the roughhewn spontaneity of early comic books, pushes the visuals immediately into parody. Arch and overdetermined, the drawings defer to, yet remain crucially *different* from, a long line of predecessors. Hence they provide a ripe and suggestive context for the words.

In sharp contrast to the pictures, the written narration of "I Guess" explores a child's relationships with three different males: his grandfather, his "best friend," and his stepfather. The first-person narrator, rambling from one recollection to the next, speaks in a sort of blank parataxis, as if unable to draw conclusions

from his own stories. His words, in their very blankness and simplicity, evoke the naiveté of childhood just as deliberately as do Ware's superhero visuals and capture the confusion of a child grappling with such perplexing issues as racial and sexual identity. For example: "he asked me if I felt weird that we were the only boys at the party. I said no, and then I asked him if he felt weird that we were the only white kids at the party. He said no, and then he asked me why I said that. I really didn't know and all of a sudden I felt gross so I rolled over and pretended to go to sleep" (78). Like the pictures, the words are essentially ironic: the narrator raises troubling questions but in a naive, unreflective way, thus cueing the reader to look further than the narrator himself can.

Ware's deployment of words in "I Guess" is radically disorienting, for, in defiance of convention, he weaves the written narrative freely, unpredictably, through the pictorial, creating what Kannenberg calls a "mutually reflective patterning" of verbal and visual themes (183). Narration appears within the drawings, not only in caption blocks, word balloons and thought balloons, but also in the guise of decorative titles, labels, sound effects, and even as parts of the diegesis, that is, as signs within the superhero's world itself. Ware practices a curious sort of enjambment: visual breaks in the text (between captions, balloons, and so forth) do not match syntactic or logical breaks in the narration. For instance, a sentence or clause may begin in a caption and continue in a dialogue balloon. Nor do changes in the relative size, shape, or boldness of the lettering always correspond to dramatic emphases in the narrated text. At times the visual emphasis seems comically inappropriate, as when, in the opening "splash" panel (fig. 5), the equivocal phrase "I GUESS" forms a bold masthead in giant letters, even as it starts a sentence that is completed in the caption underneath. Scraps of narration also appear as sound effects, as in the story's climax, where the highly fraught word "when" appears as an explosion: "*I liked things better / WHEN / it was just my mom and me, anyway*" (fig. 6).

More radical still is Ware's incorporation of the written narrative within the diegesis itself, in the form of banners, signs, and other word-bearing objects. Such

bewildering moments play with an ambiguity fundamental to comics: the verbal text (as Eisner reminds us) reads as an image, yet typically remains distinct from the narrative reality evoked by the drawings (*Comics & Sequential Art* 10; see also Abbott 156). Though the appearance of the text can inflect our reading, we assume that the printed words as such are not part of the fictional world we are experiencing. Rather, they represent or cue "sounds" within that world, or in some cases provide a gloss on that world, what might be called a nondiegetic amplification or commentary. Yet Ware destabilizes this convention by bringing fragments of the written text into the depicted world of the story (that is, into the diegesis). To the extent that this technique undercuts the verisimilitude of that world, it forces the reader to question actively the conventions of comic art. In stories that honor those conventions, printed sound effects and narration remain distinct from street signs, billboards and other objects bearing written messages within the diegesis; Ware, however, erases the distinction, thus disorienting the reader and encouraging critical awareness of those conventions. (Such conventions are the very things that make it possible for readers to construct meaning from comic art's plurality of codes.)

The story's intermixing of words and images enriches the first-person narrative, hinting at levels of oedipal conflict and psychological confusion unacknowledged in the words alone. At the same time, this verbal/visual tension compels the reader to consider critically the psychological undercurrents of the superhero genre, as suggested by certain recurrent character types and narrative tropes: the mad scientist, the imperiled woman, the hero's dual identity, the woman's rescue, the hero's gesture of mercy, the villain's convenient self-destruction. By mapping a confused, childlike narration onto these generic elements, Ware casts new light on the genre's structure and appeal.

Admittedly, "I Guess" represents a radical questioning of the way comics work; few comics test the limits of the form so rigorously. Yet, by destabilizing the conventions of visual/verbal interplay, Ware's six-page effort throws those conventions into relief, and encourages us to read even conventional comics



Figure 5. Chris Ware, "I Guess."
Raw Vol. 2, No. 3, page 76.
© 1990 Chris Ware. Used with permission.

more attentively. Dismantling genre as well as form, Ware's experiment demonstrates the potential of comics to create challenging, multilayered texts: his simple, broadly representational drawings contribute to, rather than mitigate, the suggestive complexity of the narrative, while the blank, naive narratorial voice both amplifies and undercuts the appeal of the drawings. Moreover, the constant tension between the two forces us to take heed of the role the reader must play in constructing meaning. For it is only at the level of the reader's intervention that Ware's words and images can conjoin to suggest a meaning that subsumes both.

Ware's narrative strategy assumes a sophisticated reader, one who recognizes highly fraught parodic gestures as such, and whose confusion can be turned to advantage. In sum, "I Guess" illustrates the *interactive* nature of comics reading and the possibility of generating meaning through the manipulation of tensions inherent in the reading experience.

PICTOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE: CODE VS. CODE

Yet the tension between picturing and writing can exceed even what Ware's story offers. In fact



Figure 6. Ware, "I Guess."
81 (excerpt).
© 1990 Chris Ware.
Used with permission.

comics can exploit this tension without incorporating words per se, as the growing body of "mute" or "pantomime" (that is, wordless) comics attests (see Groensteen, "La bande dessinée muette"). Such comics often rely on diagrammatic symbols, such as panels, speed or vector lines, and ideograms, to gloss or reinforce what's going on in the pictures (see, for example, Fischer and Beronă). Nor does the "written" text within balloons or captions have to consist of words in a conventional sense. Indeed, in comics dialogue icons may take the place of words: the use of pictograms within balloons is a rich tradition, recently explored by such cartoonists as Hendrik Dorgathen and Eric Cartier. For example, Cartier's *Flip in Paradise* and *Mekong King*, told in miniature album format, use pictograms to suggest elaborate dialogues between the hapless picaro, Flip, and the inhabitants of the various lands he visits.

In *Flip in Paradise*, for instance, as the hero haggles over the price of a joint, his dialogue devolves into a cluster of visual non sequiturs—as if Flip is already beginning to succumb to the effects of dope (fig. 7). At first the pictograms in the balloons suggest bargaining, with ever-decreasing amounts of money, but as the balloons crowd together the dialogue's logic becomes harder and harder to grasp. Later in the same book a drunken Flip will teach a parrot some new words—all about killing and cooking the bird—as shown in a tête-à-tête in which man and bird spout the same pictograms. Cartier makes ingenious use of such visual symbols to dramatize Flip's struggles to communicate in strange lands

(ironic, as these symbols allow the cartoonist's work itself to cross national and cultural borders).³

Such visual "dialogue" may be drawn in a different style than the pictures used to establish the diegesis: typically, they are less particular, or more generic. Alternately, they may be of the very *same* style, just enclosed within balloons like regular dialogue. In François Avril and Philippe Petit-Roulet's *Soirs de Paris*, for example, the story "63 Rue de la Grange aux Belles" (fig. 8) uses elaborate pictograms to capture the conversations taking place at a cocktail party. The partygoers' dialogue balloons contain a range of pictures: from simple icons, as when a man asks a woman to dance; to cartoons in the same style as that used to depict the speakers (as when a would-be Romeo uses a series of balloons to itemize a woman's attractive features: her eyes, breasts, legs, and so on); to detailed swipes of images by such artists as Gauguin and Matisse, which indicate the topics of conversation among a group of cultured wallflowers. Such examples suggest that visual/verbal tension is not necessarily even a matter of playing words against pictures; it may be a matter of playing symbols against other symbols.

Such visual/verbal tension results from the juxtaposition of symbols that function diegetically and symbols that function non-diegetically—that is, the mingling of symbols that "show" and symbols that "tell." More precisely, we may say that *symbols that show* are symbols that purport to depict, in a literal way, figures and objects in the imagined world of the comic, while *symbols that tell* are those that offer a kind of diacritical commentary on the images or (to

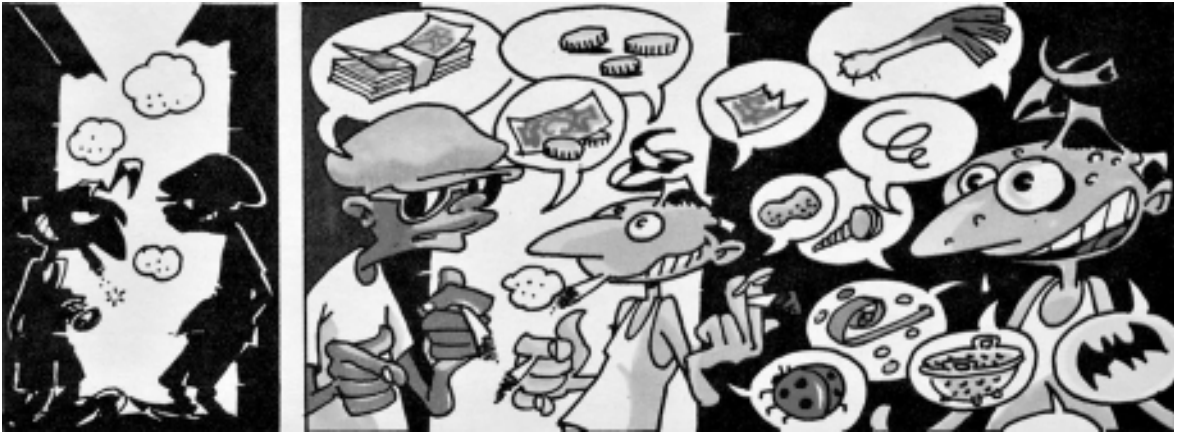


Figure 7. Eric Cartier, *Flip in Paradise* (n. pag.). © Eric Cartier. Used with permission.

use another rough metaphor) a “soundtrack” for the images. In most comics, the symbols that show are representational drawings while the symbols that tell are words, balloons, and a few familiar icons. (These icons are nonalphabetic symbols of a sort that many word processors now make available to writers: arrows, dotted lines, lightbulbs, stars, and so forth.) But the potential exists for comics creators to push this tension much further, even to incorporate representational drawings as “dialogue” (as in Cartier, and Avril and Petit-Roulet) and to blur the difference between alphabetic symbols and pictures. At its broadest level, then, what we call visual/verbal tension may be characterized as the clash and collaboration of *different codes of signification*, whether or not written words are used. Again, the deployment of such devices assumes a knowing reader.

2. SINGLE IMAGE VS. IMAGE-IN-SERIES

Most definitions of comics stress the representation of time, that is, of temporal sequence, through multiple images in series. The process of dividing a narrative into such images—a process that necessarily entails omitting as well as including—can be called (à la Robert C. Harvey) *breakdown*, a word derived from “breakdowns,” a term of art that refers to the rough drawings made in the process of planning out a comics story (*Art of the Funnies* 14–15). The reverse process, that of reading through such images and inferring connections between them, has been

dubbed (borrowing from gestalt psychology) “closure” by McCloud, in keeping with the reader-response emphasis of his *Understanding Comics*. In fact “breakdown” and “closure” are complementary terms, both describing the relationship between *sequence* and *series*: the author’s task is to evoke an imagined sequence by creating a visual series (a breakdown), whereas the reader’s task is to translate the given series into a narrative sequence by achieving closure. Again, the reader’s role is crucial, and requires the invocation of learned competencies; the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness.

At times this process of connecting, or closure, seems straightforward and unproblematic, as when strong visual repetition and/or verbal cueing make the connections between images immediate, or at least fairly obvious. For instance, Julie Doucet’s self-referential vignette “The Artist” uses successive panels to capture the methodical, step-by-step provocation of a striptease (fig. 9). This striptease implicates the spectator in an unnerving way, for the artist ends by spilling her guts with a knife. The deliberate, incremental advances of the sequence, from one panel to the next, establish a rhythm and an expectation, and eventually this rhythm makes the unthinkable thinkable: the artist mutilates and literally *opens* herself before our eyes in calm, measured steps. This violent, self-destructive climax, accomplished through methodical breakdown, ultimately exceeds and beggars all expectations. (The technique reappears in



Figure 8. François Avril (drawings) & Philippe Petit-Roulet (scenario), "63 Rue de la Grange aux Belles" (selected panels). *Soirs de Paris* (n. pag.). © Les Humanoïdes Associés. Used by permission of François Avril and Philippe Petit-Roulet.

other early Doucet stories, such as "Heavy Flow" and "A Blow Job," with their gradual yet shocking transformations.)

At other times, closure may require more active effort on the part of the reader, as demonstrated repeatedly in Jason Lutes's novel *Jar of Fools*. A quarter of the way into the novel, a two-page sequence (36–37) depicts a day's work for Esther O'Dea, who serves customers at a coffee bar called the Saturn Café (fig. 10). In just twenty-four panels Lutes manages to evoke the tedium and sheer drudgery of seven hours on the job, showing both minute details and Esther's overall attitude toward her work. The breakdown of the action is characterized by several bold choices: for instance, Lutes challenges the reader by beginning from the inside out, with a close-up of Esther preparing a double espresso, rather than from the outside in, with an establishing shot of the café itself (here being introduced to readers for the first time). We see a larger image of the café interior only *after* Esther hands the espresso to a customer, and a shot of the exterior (specifying the location) only in the middle of the sequence. Thus Lutes

frames the entire day from Esther's point of view, sticking close to the minutiae of her clockwork routine. The repeated use of close-ups throughout the sequence reinforces the repetitive yet discontinuous nature of her work.

After showing the interior of the café, Lutes builds the rest of the sequence around Esther's query, "Can I help you?"—a phrase she mechanically repeats throughout the day. One customer responds to this with a suggestive sneer and a verbal come-on, "In more ways than one, sweetheart," an overture which Esther repays with stony silence even as she imagines belting the man with a left hook (36). That she *imagines* this, but does not do it, is something the reader must figure out for herself: Lutes suggests this both by the unvarying rhythm of the sequence and by the subtle variation in panel bordering around the imagined punch (the latter a technique used previously by Lutes to set off dreams and memories—by this point the reader presumably knows the code). Yet the moment comes as a shock nonetheless, due in part to the repeated use of a single, unvarying image—Esther's taciturn face—to



Figure 9. Julie Doucet, "The Artist." *Lève Ta Jambe Mon Poisson Est Mort!* (n. pag.). © Julie Doucet. Used with permission.

pace the sequence. We see her land a blow, yet nothing about her or around her changes to match this unexpected outburst. The reader must negotiate the larger context of Lutes's narrative to make this key distinction.

On the next page, as the hours crawl forward, Lutes repeats the image of a clock—along with Esther's "Can I help you?"—to suggest the slow, frustrating passage of time. Verbal and visual repetition (the clock, the coffee cups, Esther's face, *Can I help you?*) succeed in quickly evoking a sense of boredom and restiveness—no mean feat. The repeated close-up of the clock face, with changing times, finally gives way to the sight of Esther watching the clock from an oblique angle, as her spoken *Can I help you?* becomes an unspoken *Can I kill you?* (37). This is the moment when her shift ends, finally, and she can leave the café. In just a few panels, then, Lutes compresses a day's work into a montage of numbing, repetitive activity and emotional frustration. To follow this sequence, the reader must be mindful of Lutes's previously established habits as a storyteller—his approach to panel bordering, his

interpolations of dream and fantasy into mundane reality, and so on—and take an active part in constructing a flow of events from discontinuous images.

At times achieving closure can be quite difficult, as when images seem radically disjointed and verbal cues are scant. For example, Art Spiegelman's wordless "drawn over two weeks while on the phone" (from *Raw* No. 1, rpt. in Spiegelman and Mouly, *Read Yourself Raw*) presents a series of disconnected panels with recurrent character types and situations but no narrative per se. Generic conventions—nods to film noir, for instance—are repeatedly invoked but without a linear rationale; motific repetition suggests at best a vague connection between otherwise disjunct panels. Certain characters and symbols are repeated: geometric symbols, for instance, which serve as pictographic dialogue, as decorative effects, and, in a droll reversal, even as characters. But the sought-for "unity" of the piece, finally, rests on the reader's recognition of the author's formal playfulness rather than on any coherent narrative. It takes much knowledge and careful attention to read Spiegelman's series as a sequence.



Figure 10. Jason Lutes, *Jar of Fools* 36–37. © Jason Lutes. Used with permission.

The tension between single image and image-in-series is bound up with other formal issues, and therefore hard to codify. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* remains the strongest theoretical treatment (in English, that is) of comics sequencing; yet McCloud, perhaps because he does not consider visual/verbal interplay crucial to the form, neglects just how much the interaction of image and word can inform, indeed enable, the reading of sequences. Verbal cues do help to bridge the gaps within a sequence, as seen in common transitional captions such as "Later . . ." or "Meanwhile . . ." (devices that have fallen from favor as readers become more versed in reading comics, just as title cards, fades, irises, and other such transitional devices fell from favor in cinema). In fact verbal continuity can impose structure on even the most radically disjointed series. Witness, for instance, Spiegelman's oft-reprinted "Ace Hole, Midget Detective," in which the hero's nonstop narration (a spoof of hard-boiled fiction)

serves to structure an otherwise nonlinear barrage of non sequiturs, visual gags, and stylistic swipes.

To some extent, then, the process of transitioning, or closure, depends not only on the interplay between successive images but also on the interplay of different codes of signification: the verbal as well as the visual. In other words, how readers attempt to resolve one tension may depend on how they resolve another. Verbal/visual interplay often muddies the pristine categories of transition that McCloud tries to establish in *Understanding Comics* (moment to moment, action to action, scene to scene, and so on). Words can smooth over transitions and unobtrusively establish a dramatic continuity that belies the discontinuity of the images. Two contrasting examples from Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, both scripted by Pekar and illustrated by R. Crumb, illustrate this point:

In "The Harvey Pekar Name Story" (1977), the visuals pace and punctuate a verbal monologue, and

the successive images are near-identical, so much so that a reader who held the book at arm's length and squinted would be hard-pressed to see any variation (fig. 11). (Lutes uses a similar strategy in the above example from *Jar of Fools*, but Pekar and Crumb use fewer variations and push the repetition much farther.) The story concerns the relationship between name and identity, and the near-sameness of the drawings both reinforces and subverts the speaker's preoccupation with self-definition. Here a man named "Harvey Pekar" (not to be confused with the author) addresses the reader in forty-eight equal-sized panels over four pages. His concern? His name—which, though unusual, turns out not to be unique, as he discovers by looking through the phone book, where he finds not one but two other "Harvey Pekar" listings. The deaths of these two other Pekars (Harvey Sr. and Harvey Jr., father and son) restore the narrator's sense of uniqueness, until a *third* Harvey Pekar appears in the directory, prompting the age-old question, "What's in a name?" On a more personal level, the narrator is left asking himself, and us, "Who is Harvey Pekar?"—a question he can answer only with silence, in the final, wordless panel.

Like Doucet's "The Artist," "The Harvey Pekar Name Story" relies on minute changes from panel to panel to convey a carefully timed sequence. Yet Pekar and Crumb take an even more deliberate approach, calling for a constant subject and point of view with only the minutest changes in gesture and nuance. Pekar's breakdowns invoke the rhythms of verbal storytelling or stand-up comedy, with occasional silent panels for pause and emphasis; the relationship between the speaker and the reader is everything, as the former confronts the latter in a frustrated attempt at self-affirmation. This attempt is fraught with irony: the consistent, even monotonous, point of view in every panel supplies the very appearance of stability that the narrator craves, but the serial repetition of his likeness (subtly varied by Crumb) erodes our sense of his uniqueness. Both the story's rhythm and its themes depend on the unvarying visuals, which force us to confront this "Harvey Pekar" in all his (thwarted) individuality even as they help us concentrate on the spoken text.

In contrast, Pekar and Crumb's "Hypothetical Quandary" (1984) merges words and pictures more dynamically, and asks more of the reader in her quest for closure (fig. 12). This story is inward-looking and nakedly autobiographical, focusing on thought rather than talk. Rendered in a bolder, brushed style, "Quandary" finds Harvey carrying on a dialogue with himself as he drives, then walks, to a bakery to buy bread: How would he react to success and fame? Would it blunt his writing by robbing him of his "working man's outlook on life"? Would it dilute his personal vision? This hypothetical dilemma (not entirely hypothetical, for Pekar *has* had brushes with fame, especially in the wake of the *American Splendor* film in 2003) occupies Harvey through his entire trip to the bakery; indeed, except for a single panel in which he buys the bread, all of Harvey's words occur in thought balloons, and the dark, lushly textured images position him within a fully realized world rather than vis-à-vis the reader in a full-on monologue. (For a thoughtful discussion of this story in a different context, see Witek, *Comic Books as History* 148–49.)

Propelled as much by Pekar's text as by the subtle authority of Crumb's pictures, "Hypothetical Quandary" moves Harvey (and the reader) over a great distance, telescoping his Sunday morning expedition into three pages. Like the above example from Lutes's *Jar of Fools*, this story relies on words as well as common visual cues for its pacing. Driving, walking, buying bread, walking again—all of these happen while Harvey's internal dialogue carries on without interruption, until the last two panels find him savoring the bread's fresh smell, his quandary forgotten. The continuity of the verbal text disguises the discontinuity of the visual: Pekar's ongoing words, exploring all the twists and turns of Harvey's thinking, elide the gaps in the visual sequence, making this stylized evocation of his world seem naturalistic and unforced. Whereas "The Harvey Pekar Name Story" weds the author's text to deliberately repetitive breakdowns and a single, static composition, "Hypothetical Quandary" uses text to carry the reader from one locale to the next without ever losing continuity of thought. These contrasting examples point up the possibility that

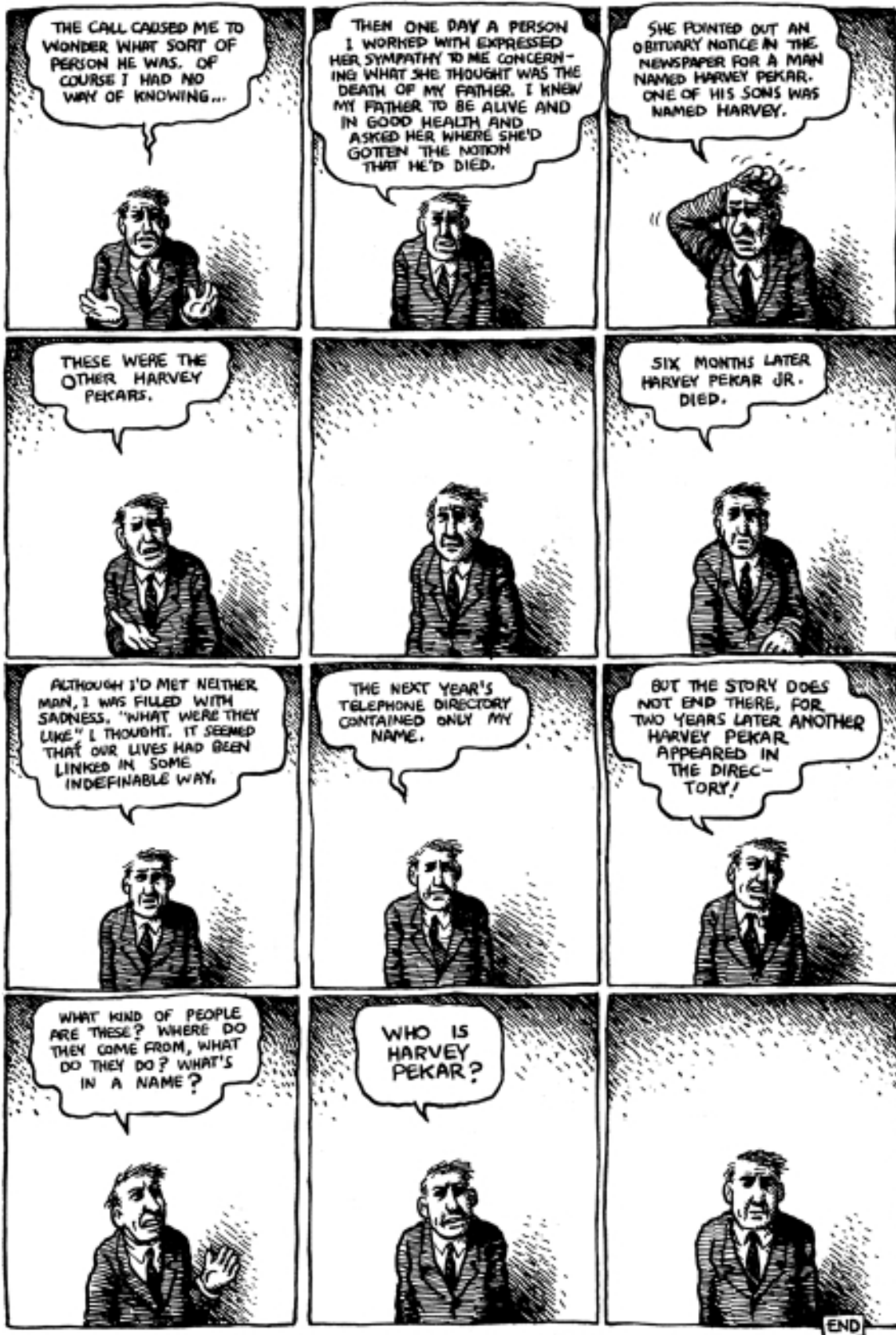


Figure 11. Harvey Pekar and R. Crumb, "The Harvey Pekar Name Story." *Bob and Harv's Comics* 4. © Harvey Pekar. Used with permission.



Figure 12. Harvey Pekar and R. Crumb, "Hypothetical Quandary." *Bob and Harv's Comics* 80. © Harvey Pekar. Used with permission.

breakdown may depend on mixing the verbal and the visual. Thus the two tensions named so far, *code vs. code* and *single image vs. image-in-series*, interact to create a yet more complex tension, soliciting the reader's active efforts at resolution.

3. SEQUENCE VS. SURFACE

In most cases, the successive images in a comic are laid out contiguously on a larger surface or surfaces (that is, a page or pages). Each surface organizes the images into a constellation of discrete units, or "panels." A single image within such a cluster typically functions in two ways at once: as a "moment" in an imagined sequence of events, and as a graphic element in an atemporal design. Some comics creators consciously play with this design aspect, commonly called *page layout*, while others remain more conscious of the individual image-as-moment. Most long-form comics maintain a tug-of-war between these different functions, encouraging a near-simultaneous apprehension of the single image as both moment-in-sequence and design element. The "page" (or *planche*, as French scholars have it, a term denoting the total design unit rather than the physical page on which it is printed) functions both as sequence and as object, to be seen and read in both linear and nonlinear, holistic fashion.

This tension has been described in various ways. For instance, French scholar Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, in a seminal essay, proposed the terms "linear" and "tabular" to denote the sequential and nonsequential functions respectively ("Du linéaire au tabulaire"; see also Peeters 39–40). "Tabular" perhaps conjures the traditional Western comics layout of a boxlike or gridlike enclosure, rather like a mathematical table, within which each panel acts as a discrete cell; potentially, though, it applies to any comics page, even one that abandons such rectilinear design. More generally, we can say that the single image functions as both a point on an imagined timeline—a self-contained moment substituting for the moment before it, and anticipating the moment to come—and an element of global page design. In other words, there is a tension

between the concept of "breaking down" a story into constituent images and the concept of laying out those images together on an unbroken surface. This tension lies at the heart of comics design—and poses yet another challenge to the reader.

This tension can be illustrated through two contrasting examples from "Waiting," a series of single-page alternative comic book stories scripted by Linda Perkins and drawn by Dean Haspiel. The first in the series (from *Keyhole* No. 1, June 1996) uses a conventional design conceit, often called the "nine-panel grid" by comics readers, to suggest the repetitive, unvarying nature of a waitress's work (fig. 13). The strictly gridlike (3-by-3) configuration of the page imparts a constant, unyielding rhythm to the piece, one well suited to the patterns of repetition shown in the compositions. Of all the panels, only the middle one in each tier shows significant variation, as it depicts the face of yet another customer asking the same question (a question already answered in the menu). Panel four, showing the waitress outside (presumably outside the restaurant), implies seasonal variation through the use of snow, though, curiously, the waitress's outfit has not changed to suit the weather. The drastic elision of intervening time, and the static repetition of visual motifs—of exact images, in fact—emphasizes the numbing sameness of the waitress's work routine (not unlike the mood of the café scene in *Jar of Fools*). This routine is enlivened only by the comic grotesquerie of the customers. Here a rigid layout reinforces the air of tedium, frustration, and stasis (that is, of waiting, in two senses) conveyed in the repeated compositions.

If the first "Waiting" story conveys a sense of the tedium and repetition involved in waiting tables, the third (from *Keyhole* No. 3, January 1997) conveys a hectic, almost frantic impression of the hard work involved. Its more inventive and complicated layout reinforces the busyness and overwhelming sense of customer demand called for in the scenario: here the waitress is working very hard indeed, responding gamely to the simultaneous requests and comments of a large dining party (fig. 14). Perkins and Haspiel exploit the tension between page (*planche*) and panel to emphasize the stressful, even frenzied, quality of the dinner from the waitress's point of view.



Figure 13. Linda Perkins and Dean Haspiel, "Waiting." Keyhole No. 1. © Dean Haspiel and Linda Perkins. Used with permission.

WAITING

story by
LINDA PERKINS
art by
DEAN HASPIEL



Figure 14. Linda Perkins and Dean Haspiel, "Waiting." Keyhole No. 3. © Dean Haspiel and Linda Perkins. Used with permission.

The first three panels are page-wide oblongs, crowded with detail, which convey the entire dinner in synoptic fashion. Common questions and banal observations appear in tail-less word balloons, as if hovering over the party: *Where is the bathroom?*, *This would be the perfect place to bring Mom*, and so on. A man's request for "a wine glass" in the first panel leads to his cry for assistance in the second: "Hey!!! I spilled my drink!" (The waitress, intent on taking another customer's order, responds by handing him a towel, without even turning to look.) In the third panel, the waitress balances several steaming coffee cups on her arm while the customers look on in the background, barely visible over the cups. A full-figure image of the embattled waitress overlaps these three panels, linking them, her six arms spread Kali-like (roughly speaking) to imply her haste and efficiency. Each hand holds a common tool: a menu, a peppermill, and so on. This full shot of the waitress not only provides an irreverent bit of visual parody but also serves to unite these horizontal panels in a single graphic conceit without arresting the sequence of events depicted. What's more, we are able to see the events from multiple perspectives at once, for the first panel appears to show the dinner party from the waitress's viewpoint, while the second and third depict the waitress herself, in medium and close-up shots respectively. Her overlapping figure in these three panels frustrates any sense of linearity, allowing for an impossible and provocative at-onceness.

The last three panels on the page, forming the bottom tier, are stunted verticals of equal size, much smaller than the images above. They depict a briefer sequence of events: a final exchange between the waitress and the man paying the bill. In reply to the skimpy tip (just \$5 for a bill of \$295), the waitress asks the man, "Was there something wrong with the service?" His response is simple and unequivocal, though seemingly irrelevant: "Yes. My wife burned my toast this morning." His grotesque, comically exaggerated features contrast with the idealized close-up of the waitress immediately above, lending a spiteful certainty to his accusation. Here there are no outsized images to violate or overlap the bordered panels; only three simple images in a deliberate

rhythm, reminiscent of the gridlike regularity in the first "Waiting" story. Whereas the top three panels convey the almost desperate efficiency of the waitress's efforts, and show her earning what by rights ought to be a generous tip, the last three show her comeuppance, as masculine spite holds her responsible, by proxy, for another woman's failure to please. It is largely through the ingenious layout of the page that Perkins and Haspiel underscore the unfairness of the man's response.

The page divides into two design units—the three horizontal panels and the three verticals—to contrast the waitress's efforts with her scant reward. In the top three panels, the temporal sequence is confused, even collapsed, by the full figure of the waitress, an overlapping design element that functions tabularly to stress the frantic nature of her activity. The overlapping of images suggests the overwhelming demands of her work. In the bottom three, the uniform, unbroken panels, shorn of any elaborate design elements, establish a rhythm that leads to the strip's bitter punch line.

Uniting these two design units, the final image of the man's face stares at the reader as if seen from the waitress's point of view, a visual echo of the story's first panel (in which the man turns to get her attention). Moreover, the final close-up of the man contrasts with the close-up of the waitress directly above: she looks left, intent on her work, while he seems to be moving right, as if to leave; her face, an unblemished white, contrasts with his darker, more detailed features. Yet the two are linked by a strong vertical down the right-hand side of the page: in a tabular reading, the last "cell" relates directly to the cell above it, while in a linear reading it supplies the climax for the entire six-panel story. Linearly, the incident progresses from dinner, through dessert, to the final payoff, while, tabularly, the figures of the waitress and the man vie for position on the page. The Kali-like waitress clearly dominates the surface, yet the man moves from right to center to right again, in an attempt to (re)assert his dominance. The layout of the entire page stresses the complete figure of the waitress, on the upper left, and the opposed close-ups of waitress and man, on the lower right. The fact that

each panel functions both as a discrete part and within the larger context of the layout generates the tension that makes this vignette so effective.

From a reader's point of view, then, there is always the potential to choose: between seeing the single image as a moment in sequence and seeing it in more holistic fashion, as a design element that contributes to the overall balance (or in some cases the meaningful *imbalance*) of the layout. The latter way of seeing privileges the dimensions of the total page/*planche*/surface, yet still invokes the meaning of the overall narrative sequence to explain why the page might be formatted as it is. Broadly, we may say that comics exploit *format* as a signifier in itself; more specifically, that comics involve a tension between the experience of reading in sequence and the format or shape of the object being read. In other words, the art of comics entails a tense relationship between perceived time and perceived space.

RE: TIMING, OR, SERIALITY VS. SYNCHRONISM

As the above discussion reveals, the representation of time in comics can vary considerably: from precise breakdowns that depict a sequence of events in minute detail to single drawings that conflate a whole series of events in one panel. In our second "Waiting" example, for instance, the horizontal panels, sprinkled with disembodied word balloons, represent a kind of synchronism, a distillation of time in which the implied duration of the sequence is rather ambiguous, enough so as to cover an entire meal. In contrast, the vertical panels at the bottom of the page are precisely timed to depict a brief sequence succinctly and unambiguously. Thus a single page can move from a vague evocation of passing time to a precise, incremental depiction of single incident (in this case a momentary exchange of dialogue: brief, clipped, even brusque). Such changes in rhythm occur so often in comics as to be almost invisible.

In the case of "Waiting" this effect is, again, partly the result of an ingenious layout. It is also partly the result of the unconventional use of floating balloons to convey snippets of banal, dinner-table conversation. As McCloud observes, the use of

words "introduce[s] time by representing that which can only exist in time-sound" (95). But this effect also depends to some extent on the composition of each drawing: in this case, Haspiel draws many diners in the horizontal panels, in order to evoke the confusion of a large gathering. Words, images, graphic design—all conjoin to create a three-panel sequence that covers an extended period of time. In fact the composition of an image and the use of words within it can create a radical synchronism by which the single image represents a lengthy interval (see McCloud 95–97; Abbott 162–65). In other words, time elapses not only between the panels but also *within* them. While images in series (breakdowns) may convey the passage of time through explicit inter-panel transitions, time is also conveyed within the confines of the single panel, thanks to composition and verbal/visual tension.

Here we have two contrasting approaches to what McCloud (108) calls "the systematic decomposition of moving images in a static medium": on the one hand, seriality, that is, breakdown, in which a sequence is represented through a series of contiguous panels; on the other, synchronism, in which a single panel represents a sequence of events occurring at different "times." While seriality may encourage a facile comparison between comics and cinematic montage, synchronism demonstrates the limits of the comparison, offering images that can make sense only within a static medium. Examples of synchronism in comics include the diagrammatic "motion lines" and other types of ideographic shorthand that denote movement, and the use of multiple, sometimes overlapping images of a single subject within a given panel (McCloud 110–12).

One example of multiple images in a single panel would be the common "take," in which a character's sudden reaction—typically, one of surprise or alarm—is shown through the partial overlapping of different facial expressions. A more elaborate technique is what McCloud calls the "polyptych," in which several distinct images of a single figure (or set of figures) are laid over a single continuous background (fig. 15). That background may be (as in McCloud's example) explicitly divided into smaller units by

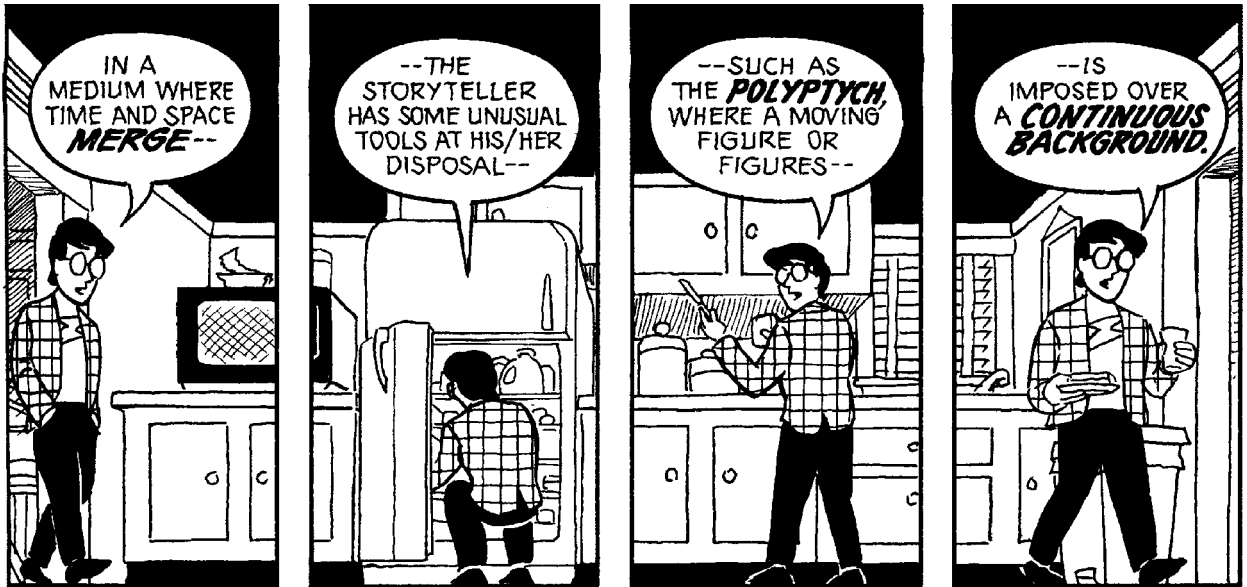


Figure 15. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 115 (excerpt). © 2004 Scott McCloud. Used with permission.

panel borders, which serve to reinforce the breakdown of the larger image into successive moments of "time." In cartoonists' parlance, such divided polyptychs are called *split panels*. They dramatically exploit the tension between linear and tabular readings of the image by creating a series of panels that also acts as a single unit—what Eisner calls a "metapanel" (*Comics & Sequential Art* 63). Such "split" panels are often used to emphasize precise sequencing or deliberate rhythms. In contrast, an *undivided* polyptych (that is, a single, undivided frame that represents an extended span of time synchronistically) tends to stress haste, intensity, near-simultaneity—or, oddly enough, the opposite: stillness and inertia.

Whether divided or not, the polyptych blurs comics' equation of time with space. It invokes the tensions established above, *single image vs. image-in-series* and *sequence vs. surface*, to generate tension of another order: between serial and synchronic readings of a single panel. This is what I would call a second-degree tension (one that presupposes the reader's awareness of the other basic tensions). Exploiting this second-degree tension assumes a sophisticated reader, because it requires that reader both to choose and to defer choosing: *I can, indeed*

must, read this image or set of images in more than one way. This demand calls attention to the ways comics negotiate time and space, which is why polyptychs tend to be used when time or space become the thematic concerns of narrative itself. Polyptychs are powerful tools for timing, or, alternately, for suggesting a character's timeless immersion in a rich, diverting space.

Bill Watterson demonstrates the potential of the synchronistic panel in a *Calvin and Hobbes* Sunday page (reprinted in *Weirdos from Another Planet!*, 1990) that succeeds in evoking both speed and environment (fig. 16). This single-panel outing depicts the title characters in a typically frenetic yet contemplative mood, as they race along in their wagon to make the most of the last days of summer. Watterson suggests their haste by directing the eye across the continuous background, as Calvin and Hobbes careen over hill and dale, describing an arc that brings them closer to the reader, then takes them further away. Both the word balloons and the tree trunks in the foreground (which serve as *de facto* panel borders) parse this scene into successive moments, introducing the time element, yet the unbroken background blurs our sense of time, conveying at once the characters' deep immersion in this scene of natural beauty and the headlong urgency

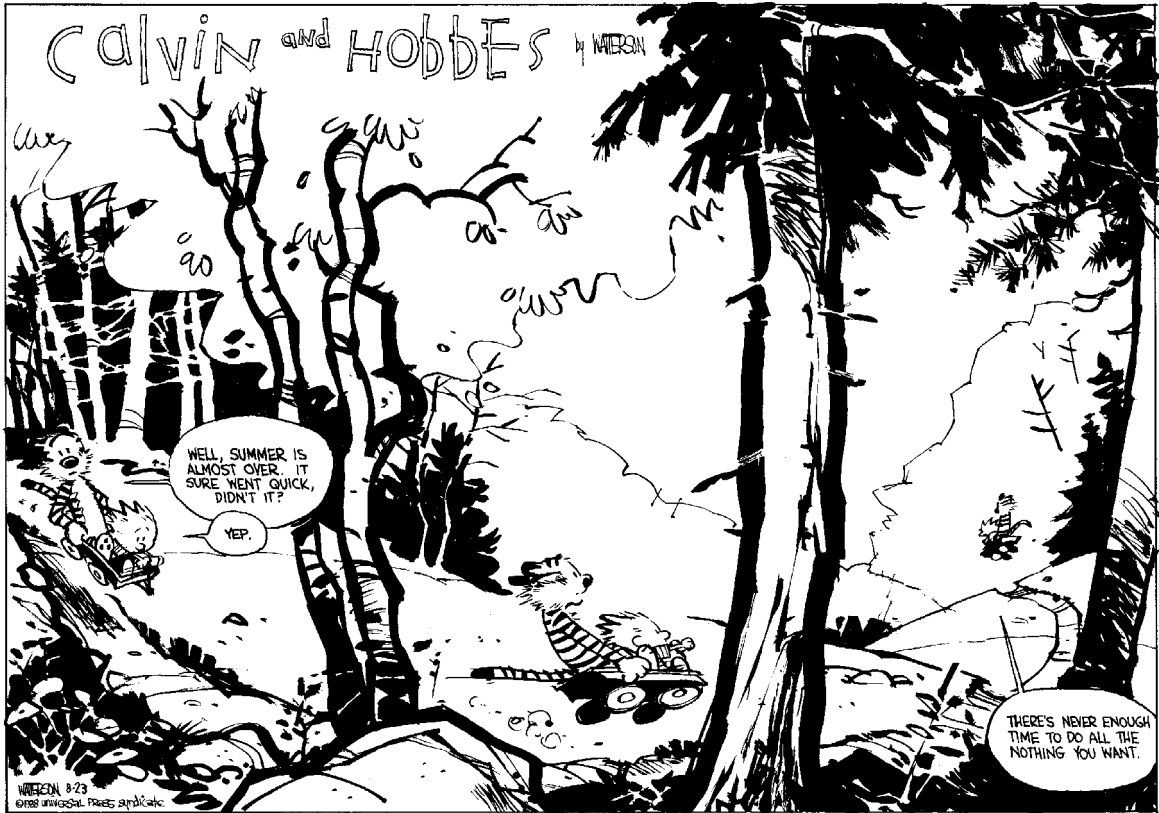


Figure 16. Bill Watterson, "Calvin & Hobbes." *Weirdos from Another Planet!* 89. "Calvin and Hobbes" © 1988 Watterson. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.

of their ride (a trope familiar from previous *Calvin* strips). Synchronism allows Watterson to linger on the vividness of the scene, while honoring the restless, energetic nature of his characters. For the boy and his tiger, nature is an arena of frantic activity—one in which "lingering" is usually done at full speed. The extraordinary thing about this page is the way it conjures up both the impatience of childhood and the timeless, still quality of the child's surroundings.

Synchronism can take other, less obvious forms, such as in the characteristic "splash" pages or spreads by the celebrated comic book artist Jack Kirby, known for his attempts to render motion in static form: multiplane compositions, slashing diagonals, drastic foreshortening and extreme distortion of the human figure. This style, regarded as "cinematic" by many (apparently including Kirby himself) in fact represents a distinctly *uncinematic* way of evoking movement in static form, a way much more suggestive than literal. Though influenced by the

classicism of adventure strip illustrators such as Alex Raymond (*Flash Gordon*), Kirby's cartooning recalls Futurism in its decomposition of movement and Cubism in its simultaneous depiction of different points of view. Though Kirby's crowded spreads seem to capture discrete and explosive moments of action, in fact they represent extended spans of time in synoptic fashion.

Take, for instance, the scene-setting image of warfare (fig. 17) found at the beginning of Kirby's *New Gods* No. 9 (July 1972, reprinted 1998). Figures loom in the extreme foreground and middle distance; figures dot the deep background as well. Motion lines give lingering physical presence to temporal phenomena, such as the squirting of acid and the leaping of bodies, while the posing of every figure suggests a vast surge toward the right-hand margin. Figures affront the viewer in drastic close-up and recede into the background along sharp diagonals, while the reading order of the word balloons guides



Figure 17. Jack Kirby (inked by Mike Royer), "The Bug." *Jack Kirby's New Gods* 198–99. © 1972 DC Comics. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

the eye from left to right, top to bottom. Tension between word and image contributes to our sense of elapsed time: one balloon notes that the attackers, the so-called "bugs," have disabled the first line of defense, while the next balloon promises to open a breach in the wall that surrounds the enemy. The leader of the charge, "Forager," stands on the far right, his words urging movement, his hand beckoning the bugs toward the margin: "Forward! Forward! Keep going!" Overall, the characters exhibit a peculiar angularity that shades toward geometric abstraction yet suggests fierce activity (swarming) and directionality (forward!). Through composition and verbal/visual interplay, Kirby captures successive moments simultaneously; this is not a snapshot but a tableau.

Such synchronic images need not be confined to the hyperbolic vocabulary of adventure comics. They can depict more mundane types of activity as well. For instance, the climactic full-page image from Mary Fleener's autobiographical "Rock Bottom" depicts

what appears to be (the story equivocates, forcing the reader to suspend judgment) a drug-addled sexual imbroglio between Mary, her occasional lover Face, and a glamorous woman named Roxanne (fig. 18). Fleener's trademark "cubismo" style, a dizzying blend of Picasso and her own sharp-edged technique, offers a radically disorienting minefield of interpretive choices for the reader, as figures blend in a sexually suggestive synchrony. Is this a dream, as Mary's sleepy expression on the top left implies? Provoking and humorous imagery—in particular, Mary's startled reaction to the (clitoral? phallic?) guitar-playing figure that emerges, erect, from a vagina—suggests her sexual encounter with Roxanne, an encounter which belies her own homophobic anxieties (shown earlier in the story when Mary worries about playing a musical gig in a lesbian bar). The overlapping images imply an entire sequence of activities that Mary cannot remember upon waking the next morning. Like Kirby, Fleener uses a single composition to suggest successive stages



Figure 18. Mary Fleener, "Rock Bottom." *Life of the Party* 46. © Mary Fleener. Used with permission.

of action. (That two such different cartoonists, divided thematically, ideologically, and historically, both exploit the ambiguity of timing suggests that this is an area ripe for study.)

In contrast to the temporally ambiguous pages of Kirby, Fleener, and Watterson, the split panel tends to stress strong rhythms and the systematic analysis of movement. For example, in the war comics of cartoonist-editor Harvey Kurtzman (published by EC in the early 1950s), split panels serve to capture the broken rhythms of warfare, alternately slow and

lightning-fast, as long intervals of torpor are punctuated by sudden fits of frantic, violent activity. At times Kurtzman's split panels emphasize the painful slowness of war and the numbing sameness of the action, which threaten to make the participants indistinct and, in fact, interchangeable; at other times, his split panels provide a precise, almost stroboscopic, breakdown of rapid movement. Often these split panels are true polyptychs, showing a single figure moving against a continuous background; at other times, they are a means of parsing *simultaneous*



Figure 19. Harvey Kurtzman, John Severin, and Will Elder, "Campaign," page 5 (excerpt). *Two-Fisted Tales*, Vol. 3. © William M. Gaines, Agent, Inc. Used with permission.

actions into successive frames—effectively turning one moment, one panel, into a sequence of two or more. Though the split panel's function depends on context, in every case it presents the reader with an ambiguity: should it be read as simultaneous or as successive, as a moment or moments?

Consider, for instance, the Civil War story "Campaign" (originally from *Two-Fisted Tales* No. 31, Jan./Feb. 1953) drawn by John Severin and Will Elder over Kurtzman's breakdowns. Here much of the action depends on waiting for things to happen: Kurtzman focuses on the peninsular campaign of 1862, as Federal troops advance on Richmond, Virginia, but the "action," so eagerly anticipated by the new recruits, mostly involves digging in, waiting, and marching. In mid-tale, a split panel (fig. 19) shows the Federals marching through Seven Pines toward Richmond, their advance punctuated by the sounds of cannon fire in the woods: "KLAK KLIKITY CRASH" (5). The weary soldiers, bent with the weight of their packs and rifles, are divided into three panels but on closer examination comprise a single composition, in which the individual figures are hardly distinguishable from each other.

Are these three different sets of soldiers, or three successive images of the same soldiers? The soldiers' complaint—that their delay in Yorktown has cost them

the advantage in Richmond—is voiced by more than one man, but the faces and personalities of the men are indistinct. Though the breakdown of the image into three successive panels punctuates the soldiers' speech and reinforces the numbing rhythms of the march, it does not single out the speakers. This indifference to individuality serves the story's larger argument, which stresses the confusion, grinding tedium, facelessness, and futility of war. In the end, the nameless sergeant, called simply "Sarge," will succumb to fever (ironically, not to wounds suffered in battle) and will be replaced by one of the recent recruits, called simply "Boy." This replacement assumes not only the sergeant's rank but also his demeanor, even his appearance. The split panel in mid-story, implying the monotony and impersonality of war, anticipates this final irony, reinforcing the ideological thrust of this characteristic Kurtzman story: warfare is meaningless and numbing. This split panel, unlike the examples above, is clearly divided into discrete blocks, but, like them, depends on a sense of temporal ambiguity.

A similar device appears, but to opposite effect, at the beginning of "Enemy Contact!" (*Two-Fisted Tales* No. 22, July/Aug. 1951), illustrated by Jack Davis—one of many Korean War tales penned by Kurtzman while that war was still being fought. This

tale, which concerns an attempt, in the midst of battle, to save the life of a soldier with acute appendicitis, begins with brutal images of death, as three American soldiers are mowed down in quick succession by “an enemy machine gun” (fig. 20). The opening splash panel shows a soldier against a stone wall, falling, contorted with pain, the POK POK POK of the machine gun driving holes into the wall behind him. The four panels beneath, taken together, form a single image, tracing the line of machine gun fire as it sweeps across the wall, felling two more soldiers and almost claiming another. The breakdown of the moment into four shorter intervals—merest fractions of a second, one imagines—isolates each victim, stressing the wantonness of the attack. These are events; these are individual deaths. Yet, while the panel borders parse the event into microseconds, the weaving of the sound effects over the images in an unbroken line (POK POK KRAK) turns this rapid-fire breakdown into a single, shocking tableau. (The next page will show us this same wall, in a single, oblong panel, with three corpses in front of it.)

Kurtzman’s control of reading rhythm is methodical, and radical. He went as far as using the split panel to stretch out the reading of single moment in time (the antithesis of the synchronic approach seen above in Kirby and Fleener). He would break a moment down to suggest the way the eye might (almost instantaneously) sweep over it and take it in—that is, “read” it. For instance, in the Korean War story “Air Burst” (*Frontline Combat* No. 4, Jan./Feb. 1952), a final split panel stresses the story’s ultimate irony (fig. 21). The Chinese soldier “Big Feet” is killed by a booby trap set by his own companion, “Lee,” whose body Big Feet carries toward the American line in the hope of surrendering. The split panel depicts the moment after, as American troops on the advance (for whom the trap was intended) discover the scene. Directing our eye across the page, the three subpanels are keyed to Kurtzman’s captions, above; his emphatic prose isolates each part of the picture for our perusal. In order: the long-dead body of Lee “sprawls on the path”; Big Feet lies dead next to him, a tripwire tangled around his foot; and the wire connects to the

grenade which has just taken Big Feet’s life. The split panel allows Kurtzman to zero in on each important element in his story (Lee, Big Feet, and the trap), while placing Big Feet (the victim of Kurtzman’s tragic irony) in dead center. The American soldiers, on whose advance the entire plot depends, approach cautiously in the background.

Time-wise, Kurtzman’s “Air Burst” may be said to represent the opposite of the approach shown in, for instance, Fleener’s “Rock Bottom.” While Fleener overlaps images in a single synchronistic panel, creating a dizzying and suggestive simultaneity, Kurtzman uses three discrete panels to direct the reading of a single, highly charged moment. In “Rock Bottom,” as in our Watterson and Kirby examples, timing is vague but evocative—open—while in “Air Burst” the timing is overdetermined, precisely controlled, almost metronomic. From these examples, we can see that the image-series alone does not determine timing in comics, for it is possible to have a series of panels in which no time seems to pass, as well as a single panel into which moments, hours, even days, are compressed. There is no single prescription for how the tensions of image/series or sequence/surface are to be resolved; rather, there is always an underlying tension between different possible ways of reading, between serial and synchronistic timing. Understanding comics conventions only heightens that tension. The reader must invoke what she knows of comics, including image/series and sequence/surface, to entertain and ultimately to reconcile different understandings of time.

4. TEXT AS EXPERIENCE VS. TEXT AS OBJECT

At a higher level of generalization, the tension *sequence vs. surface* is but one example of a larger relationship between (a) experience over time and (b) the dimensions of comics as material objects. The latter aspect, comics’ materiality, includes not only the design or layout of the page but also the physical makeup of the text, including its size, shape, binding, paper, and printing. Like traditional books, but perhaps more obviously, long-form comics can exploit both design and material qualities to communicate

FOR TWO DAYS, CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY HAD BEEN BROKEN! TWO MILES SOUTHEAST OF THE KOREAN CITY OF ICHON, AN AMERICAN PATROL MOVED UP THE ROAD... PROBING FOR ENEMY RESISTANCE! AT ONE-THIRTY, OR 1330, ARMY TIME, THE REAR SQUAD OF THE PATROL PLATOON MADE...

ENEMY CONTACT!



SOMEWHERE ON THE SLOPE TO THE RIGHT OF THE ROAD AN ENEMY MACHINE GUN OPENED UP...

...STITCHED AN AMMUNITION CARRIER, MOVED ACROSS THE STARTLED B.A.R. MAN...

...THEN CAUGHT A RIFLEMAN RUNNING LOW FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE STONE WALL...

...AND FINALLY SPLINTERED THE DOOR FRAME IN A VAIN EFFORT TO CLAIM ANOTHER!

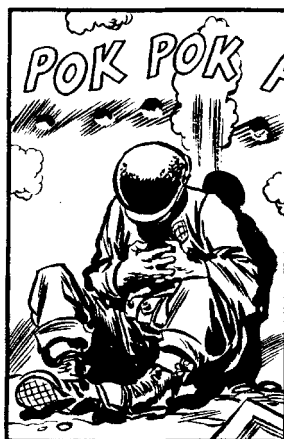


Figure 20. Harvey Kurtzman and Jack Davis, "Enemy Contact," page 1. *Two-Fisted Tales*, Vol. 1. © William M. Gaines, Agent, Inc. Used with permission.

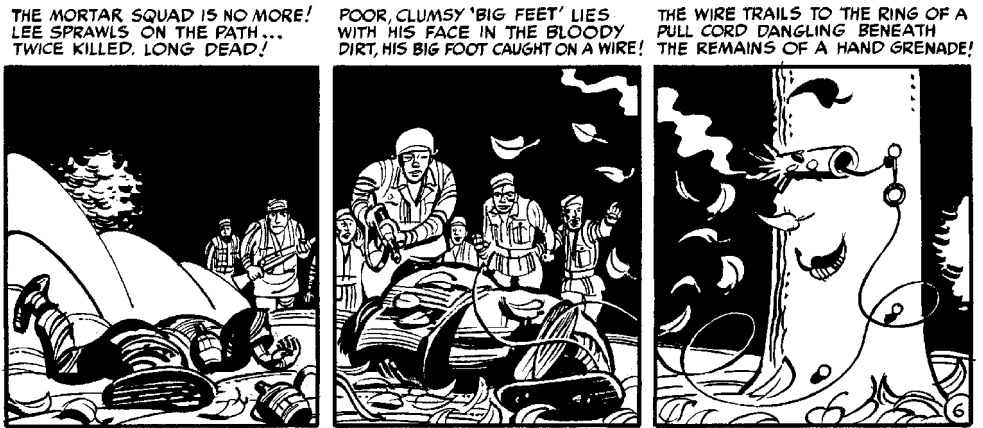


Figure 21. Harvey Kurtzman, "Air Burst," page 6 (excerpt). *Frontline Combat*, Vol. 1. © William M. Gaines, Agent, Inc. Used with permission.

or underscore the meaning(s) available in the text. Indeed, many comics make it impossible to distinguish between text per se and secondary aspects such as design and the physical package, because they continually invoke said aspects to influence the reader's participation in meaning-making.

Material considerations influence not only the total design and packaging of a publication but also matters of style and technique. The delineation of images, for instance, is always affected by the materiality of the text, for, as Eisner observes, comic art is necessarily rendered "in response to the method of its reproduction" (*Comics & Sequential Art* 153). In fact style in comics is often profoundly influenced by technological and economic means, and many cartoonists develop highly self-conscious relationships with those means, relationships that, from a reader's point of view, can become fraught with significance. For instance, the European *Klare Lijn* or *Ligne Claire* ("Clear Line") tradition of cartooning, popularized in the much-loved *Tintin* series by Belgian master Hergé, privileges smooth, continuous linework, simplified contours and bright, solid colors, while avoiding frayed lines, exploded forms, and expressionistic rendering. A style of drawing linked with the flat color of *Tintin* and similar series, the *Klare Lijn* (so labeled by the Dutch cartoonist Joost Swarte) is marked by its traditional association with children's comics, yet has grown to embrace or at least influence a whole school of alternative cartoonists who work for adults as well as, or instead of, children (see

Gravett, "Hergé"). These cartoonists often treat its associations ironically, as if to question Hergé's ideal union of style and subject (among many others: Swarte, Ever Meulen, Daniel Torres, the late Yves Chaland, and, in perhaps less obvious but still significant ways, Jacques Tardi, Vittorio Giardino, and the United States' Jason Lutes). In the work of such cartoonists as Swarte and Torres, the Clear Line carries an obvious ideological as well as stylistic burden: their comics not only parody racist stereotypes redolent of *Tintin*'s late-colonial ethos but also reveal a fascination with blurring the distinction between organic and inorganic form, a tendency perfectly realized in Swarte's cool, ironic work for both children and adults (see Heller).

Often the Clear Line seems to deny the materiality of the comics page, relying on precise linework and flat colors to create pristine and detailed settings into which simply drawn characters are inserted. Though the settings are often much more complex than the characters, the two are equated through an unerring evenness of line: like the characters, the settings tend to be without shadow, except in the most diagrammatic sense, and also relatively textureless. The resultant tendency toward flatness produces what McCloud calls a "democracy of form," in which each shape has the same clarity and value, conferring the same authority on cartoon figures as it does on meticulous scenic detail (190). This tendency can of course be undercut, as in Swarte's strip "Torn Together" ("Samen gescheurd" in Dutch),

which spoofs the democracy of forms and calls attention to the materiality of the page (fig. 22). Beginning with a panel whose upper left corner has deliberately been torn off, "Torn Together" goes on to depict a contretemps in which one man tears off the lapels of another's jacket, then tears off his ear, to which the other responds by tearing out the first man's right arm.⁴ (The dripping blood looks particularly incongruous in the *Klare Lijn*.) The second man proceeds to stuff the disembodied arm and ear into a vase to create a decoration, which he waters like a plant. This is an especially clear example of Swarte's interest in the confusion of living and unliving form: the flat coloring and pristine linework create an Hergé-like scenario that ironically equates the tearing of paper with the tearing of people's bodies. The style is inextricably part of, and prerequisite to, the story's meaning.

In contrast to the Clear Line are more expressionistic styles that revel in the texture of the page, insisting on the materiality of the print medium. Gary Panter, for instance, hailed as "the Father of Punk Comics," has pioneered a raw, "ratty-line" approach at odds with the pristine illusionism of the clear line (Callahan 10, 93; Spiegelman and Mouly, *Read* 8). Panter himself views his work in terms of "marks" rather than lines, a distinction that privileges expressiveness over clarity or precision (Groth and Fiore 231–32). In contrast to the school of Hergé, which epitomizes the use of line as a means of definition and verisimilitude, Panter's mark-making emphasizes texture as a means of immediate, visceral expression (fig. 23). He privileges the raw gestural qualities of a drawing, as a record of physical activity, over its iconic or referential function. Panter's work—notably his occasional series *Jimbo*, which follows a punk everyman through various bizarre and fragmented episodes (for example, *Cola Madness*, *Jimbo in Purgatory*)—boasts a disorienting variety of graphic techniques, as well as an oblique and disjointed approach to language. The result is a ragged cartoon surrealism, often narrative in only the loosest sense, fusing the iconography of comics and animation with a painterly, fine-arts sensibility and the aggressive energy of punk. Indeed the humor of Panter's

work depends in part on his use of rough, energetic marks to reconfigure characters lifted from television cartooning and children's comics, characters usually rendered with a slick consistency befitting industrialized cel animation. The approach recalls R. Crumb's anxious reinvention of cartoon icons in the late 1960s (see chapter 1), but with an even greater emphasis on pure mark-making rather than figuration. (The dark texturing also recalls other underground pioneers such as Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Rory Hayes, as well as Panter's British contemporary Savage Pencil.)

Many alternative comic artists, both in the United States and abroad, have followed in Panter's wake, drawing on the ironic tension between simplified cartoon vocabulary and roughhewn graphic technique. (Such disparate artists as David Sandlin, Jonathon Rosen, Julie Doucet, and Lloyd Dangle all qualify, as do such Europeans as M. S. Bastian of Switzerland and Max Andersson of Denmark.) This tension often serves to express a violent and absurdist worldview colored by apocalyptic anxieties, as in much of Panter's own work (see McKenna; Panter, Interview with John Kelly). In general, the post-Panter ratty-line (or "ugly art" or "comix brut") school subverts the cultural and ideological reassurances proffered by the Clear Line, and as such represents a visual argument about the implications of style. This argument foregrounds the active role of the reader in constructing meaning.

Beyond the bald ironies of punk, many other recent comics invoke the materiality of print by using suggestive styles based on tone and texture, just as the *ligne claire* is based on the precise delineation of form. Such styles (especially evident in the European avant-garde, with its objet d'art approach) tend to explore the relationship between figure and ground. For instance, French artist Yvan Alagbé (fig. 24) often approaches figuration in a sparse, open, almost gestural way, despite a finely nuanced realism of expression; his pages pose indistinct or half-completed figures against blank, undifferentiated backgrounds, exploring the tension between positive and negative space. Simply put, Alagbé's characters seem constantly on the verge of dissolving into the page itself.

TORN TOGETHER



Figure 22. Joost Swarte, "Torn Together." Raw No. 7, page 2 (inside front cover). © Joost Swarte. Used with permission.



Figure 23. Gary Panter, "Jimbo is 'Running Sore.'" *Read Yourself Raw* 53 (excerpt). © Gary Panter. Used with permission.

His work thus reveals a profound faith in the reader's capacity for visual closure, as it calls on our ability to complete a process of figuration only begun by the artist. In such works as *Nègres Jaunes* (1995) Alagbé turns this daring graphic technique to cultural argument, thematizing the blackness and whiteness of ink and paper as signs of ethnic and cultural difference (see Beaty, "AMOK"; Pollman).

While Alagbé's work relies on traditional grid-like paneling to enclose and delimit its open spaces, German artist Anna Sommer (*Remue-Ménage/Damen Dramen*) allows series of images to spill freely across the undivided expanse of the page (fig. 25). She too displays great confidence in the reader's ability to construct meaning from fragments. Her fluid approach to *sequence* vs. *surface* mirrors her thematic interest in openness and surprise, in particular her exploration (as here) of the mutability of gender. This method goes beyond questions of layout to the interrogation of the physical page as surface and ground. Indeed, artists like Alagbé and Sommer call for a materialist criticism, one in which print-specific qualities such as drawing technique, tone, and surface can be interrogated for their

narrative significance. Ditto those artists known for their painterly manipulation of texture, such as France's Jean-Claude Götting (who creates dense, dark imagery with a lithograph-like grain); Italy's Stefano Ricci (who sculpts thick, almost palpable tones by alternating drawing, erasing, and painting on fragile paper); the United States' Debbie Drechsler (who balances contour and texture through the mesmerizing buildup of delicate lines); and Switzerland's Thomas Ott (whose grim, often horrific fables are carved out of scratchboard, white on black—a perfect union of technique and subject). All of these artists are characterized by a keen grasp not only of comics as a narrative form but also of the relationship between narrative content and physical medium, that is, between the experience of reading and the material object. Calling attention to that relationship, these creators highlight the distance between text and reader, and foreground the reader's creative intervention in meaning-making. Their works bear out Pascal Lefèvre's dictum that "the materiality of a comic is essential. . . . The form of a drawing draws attention to the object represented in a way that deviates from ordinary perception" ("Recovering Sensuality" 142).

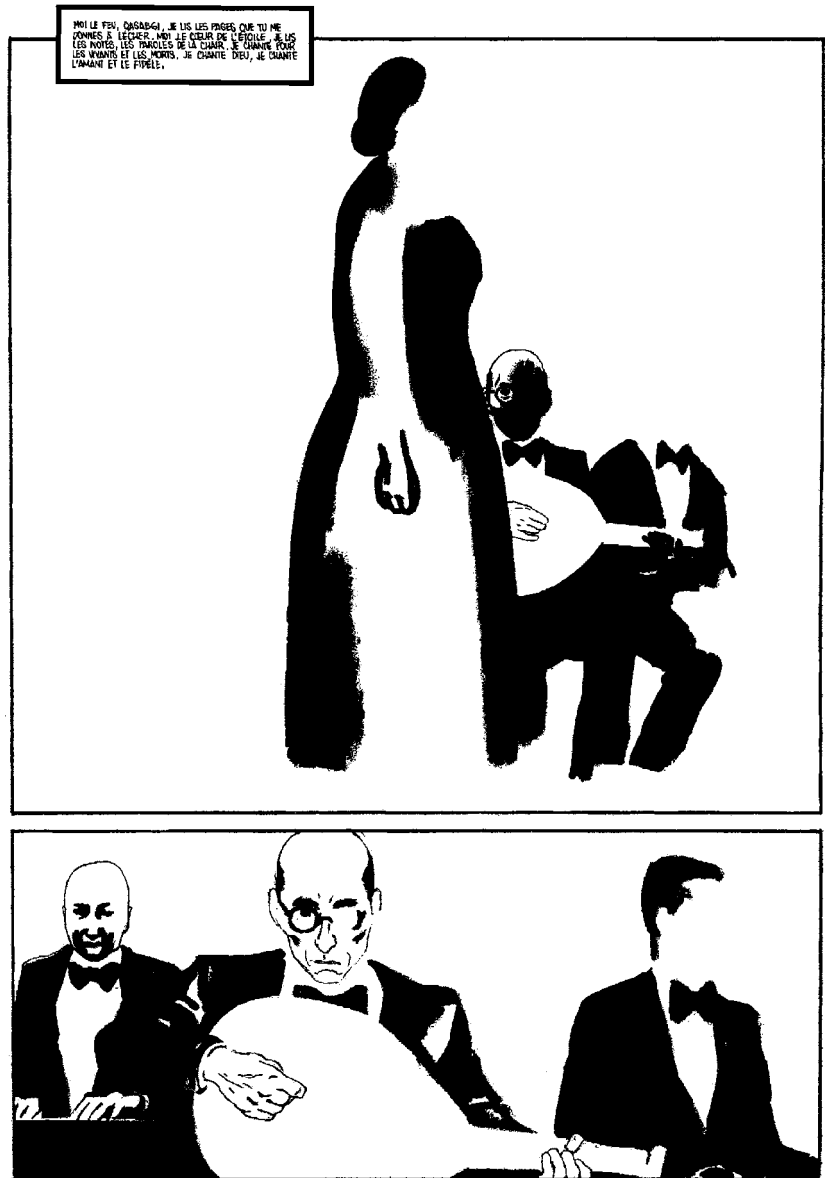


Figure 24. Yvan Alagbé, "Etoile d'Orient." *Le Cheval sans Tête*, Vol. 5: *Nous sommes les Maures* 38. © Yvan Alagbé. Used with permission.

The above examples may seem exotic to American readers—but one need not look far afield to find invocations of the page-as-object. In Art Spiegelman's celebrated *Maus*, for instance, the page repeatedly refers to itself, as "objects" overlap the panels, creating at once an illusion of volume and a sense of intimacy (as if these found objects have been mounted in a diary or scrapbook). Maps, tickets, photographs—these commonplace items appear to have been laid "on top" of the page, as if to ratify the book's documentary nature as a family auto/biography. Early on, for example, Spiegelman

conveys a key moment in the courtship between his father Vladek and his mother Anja by drawing a photograph of Anja into, and onto, the page (1:17). Anja's "photo" dominates the page, suggesting both the factualness of Spiegelman's account and Anja's growing importance in Vladek's reminiscence (see chapter 5, fig. 56). This ironic appeal to the book's status as a physical object is complex and heavily fraught, as we shall see later on. Suffice to say here that the reader's awareness is called to the materiality of the book itself (albeit through an illusion), in such a way as to inflect her understanding



Figure 25. Anna Sommer, "La femme du chasseur." *Remue Ménage* (n. pag.). © Anna Sommer. Used with permission.

of the narrative. This gambit is characteristic of Spiegelman, an artist for whom print is a privileged point of reference. (*Maus*, notwithstanding its subsequent reformatting for an archival CD-ROM, is first and foremost a *book*.) Such self-reflexive commentary is in fact quite common in comics: beyond questions of texture and volume, the materiality of texts is often highlighted through embedded visual references to books, other comics, and picture-making in general—things and activities inevitably fraught with special significance for cartoonists and their readers.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD THE HABIT OF QUESTIONING

Comics are complex objects. In light of the above discussion, the experience of reading them would seem to call for negotiation among various possible meanings. Despite the codification of techniques designed to ease this negotiation—for example, the use of overdetermined transitions (*Meanwhile . . .*), rigid gridlines, and various pictographic conventions—there is no one "right" way to read the comics page, nor any stable, Platonic conception of that page.

There is simply no consistent formula for resolving the tensions intrinsic to the experience. In fact awareness of these tensions, an awareness expected of the prepared or “sophisticated” reader, may multiply the number of choices available to the reader and can result in an even more intensive questioning of the page (as the above discussion of timing, for instance, makes clear). The foregoing analysis, then, cannot tell us How to Read Comics; it can only suggest certain heretofore neglected aspects of the experience.

Some may yet object that the form needs no instruction manual, no “how to” book to get between readers and their pleasure. Admittedly, there is much in comics that seems intuitive, much that seems naively pleasurable; the form’s reliance on pictures can make it (or certain aspects of it) immediately accessible, even to many readers who have not mastered all the disciplines that formal literacy demands. I have seen evidence of this among the children in my own life. Yet, as the above discussion shows, the form uses diverse means to solicit and guide reader participation and always involves *choosing* among different options—different strategies of interpretation, different ways of understanding. There may be much more going on than mere “picture reading”: comic art is characterized by plurality, instability, and tension, so much so that no single formula for interpreting the page can reliably unlock every comic. Far from being too simple to warrant analysis, comic art is complex enough to frustrate any attempt at an airtight analytical scheme.

In fact comic art is growing more complex all the time. The form is in flux, becoming more self-conscious in its explorations as creators increasingly recognize the knowledge and sophistication of readers. Ploys once deemed necessary to relieve formal tensions and to settle ambiguities (overdetermined transitions, word/image redundancy, predictable layouts, and so forth) have become less common, as authors have come to expect readers who are experienced, playful, and tolerant of discontinuity. This vision of a knowing readership has changed the art form, for an author’s imagining of her audience profoundly influences her sense of form and her willingness to take chances, just as, conversely, the reader’s awareness

of form enables her to become the kind of audience the author envisions. As comics readers have become more experienced, comics have traced an arc of development similar to other cultural forms, such as the novel and cinema: away from presentational devices designed to ease audience adjustment and toward a more confident and thorough exploration of the form’s peculiar tensions, potentialities, and limits.

This is not to say that today’s comics are uniformly more sophisticated than the comics of yesteryear. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a more thoroughgoing exploration of the comics page than the Sundays in George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* (1916–44), which playfully poke at every convention without ever compromising the strip’s blend of wry lyricism and thematic depth. Likewise, in the work of the form’s pioneers—for example, in Rodolphe Töpffer’s epochal series of comics albums (c. 1827–46)—we find continual, and ever-surprising, experimentation. But the interrogation of comics form has recently become more widespread, intensive, and self-conscious. This is true even in the tightly controlled precincts of American newspaper strips, where, for example, Bill Watterson’s use of breakdown to juxtapose reality and fantasy (in *Calvin and Hobbes*) has led to comparable moves in many other strips. Yet it is especially true of alternative comics and graphic novels in the wake of Spiegelman’s *Maus*. In the alternative comics avant-garde, we find radical reexaminations of form from such respected cartoonists as Chris Ware, whose *ACME Novelty Library* brings a post-Spiegelman rigor to the manipulation of design and color, and France’s Marc-Antoine Mathieu (*Julius Corentin Acquefacques, prisonnier des rêves*), who has experimented, dizzyingly, with the design and material packaging of comics-as-books (see Beaty, “Compelling Experimentation”). All of these works point to a growing awareness of “the audience” as experienced, knowledgeable, and eager to recognize its own role in making meaning.

We cannot acknowledge the scope and sophistication of that role as long as we insist on the ease and simplicity of comics. The notion of ease, so often mobilized in criticism (even appreciative criticism) of

the form, overlooks the complexity and complicity involved in reading comics, reducing this interactive process to the passive registration of a few highly-charged impressions. This is why criticism in English, until very recently, has been unable to distinguish between *skimming* comics and *reading* comics, with the result that critical discussion of the form has been generally impoverished and, at times, irresponsible. My hope is that the above discussion, though it stops short of trying to construct a universal critical scheme, will inspire readers to ask probing questions of the comics they read, questions such as:

- What can I glean from the different codes (images, words, symbols) invoked here? What can I learn from their interaction? How do words and images relate to or approach each other?
- Does the appearance of the written text seem to influence or inflect my reading of it, and if so, how?
- Does there seem to be one unified “message” here, reinforced by the overlapping of codes, or instead a conflict and contradiction between messages?
- How am I to understand this sequence of images, based on what I have to do to connect one image to the next? What is included, and what excluded, from the sequence? How do words and symbols assist, or complicate, my efforts to read this sequence as such?
- How does the layout of this page or surface—the relative size, shape, and positioning of its images—inflect my understanding of the narrative? When I look at this page, am I conscious of its overall design, or of the way I move from one design element to the next? Are there moments at which it helps to be

aware of both? How are the boundaries, or margins, of the page used? How are the successive images delimited and juxtaposed?

- What relationship does this page create between time and space? Am I ever in doubt about that relationship?
- How does the design of this publication reinforce or work against its content? Does reading this text feel like witnessing a story, or handling an object, or both?

Such questions, while perhaps impressionistic, provide lenses through which we can more fully appreciate, and more pointedly critique, the comics text.

In fact addressing such questions is a must, not only for the discussion of comics as literature but also for sociological and ideological analyses of comics as artifacts of mass culture. For it is the reader's effort to resolve such questions that positions her vis-à-vis the text, indeed that defines her as “the reader,” calling on her to assume a particular role. If reading is an act of reimagining oneself in response to the demands of a text, then we need to consider how comics present their “demands,” that is, how they reach out to their readers and urge them to fulfill certain tasks. Comics demand a different order of literacy: they are never transparent, but beckon their readers in specific, often complex ways, by generating tension among their formal elements. Recognition of this complex relationship is prerequisite to grappling with the literary, sociohistorical and ideological aspects of the form—and such a recognition lies behind and indeed motivates the remainder of this study, as we turn our attention to groundbreaking examples of alternative comics.

explicit criticism of public figures and, in general, demanded adherence to an authoritarian ideal (in which the law is never wrong and lawbreakers are never right). Targeted at such comics as the infamous horror, suspense, and satire titles from trend-setting publisher E.C., the Code effectively snuffed the kind of antiauthoritarian comics later celebrated by the underground. For the history and significance of the Code, see Nyberg's *Seal of Approval*. For a general treatment of comics censorship, including the global influence of the late-1950s American crisis, see Lent, ed., *Pulp Demons*, and Leonard Rifas's review of same.

4. *Mad* (in both comic book and magazine format) has been cited repeatedly as a major influence, both on underground comix and on American satire in general. *Mad* founder/editor Harvey Kurtzman was the single figure from mainstream media most cited by the comix and a direct inspiration for such cartoonists as Crumb, Lynch, and Spiegelman. Regarding the *Mad*/comix connection, see Groth and Fiore 24–38; Estren 37–38; Rosenkranz 275; *Bijou Funnies* No. 8 (1973), an underground pastiche of *Mad* with a cover by Kurtzman himself; and Spiegelman's comic-strip eulogy for Kurtzman ("Genius").

5. The Cartoonists Co-Op Press, a short-lived publishing collective formed in 1973 by Bill Griffith and other Bay Area artists, circulated an advertisement in comics form (drawn by Willy Murphy) that satirized the comix publishing business for making undergrounds "almost as stupid and disgusting as . . . overground comics." This ad depicts underground publishing as an impersonal, corporate process presided over by a "Mr. Bigg," whose comix factory spews out tons of sub-par publications yet cannot boast sales to match. The ad implicitly links questions of quality, creative ownership, and, of course, sales (Estren 252–53). In 1973 Griffith had already inveighed against a rising tide of retrograde comix in an editorial in the San Francisco *Phoenix* ("A Sour Look"). See also Rosenkranz 217–18.

6. For historical background on fandom and direct sales, consult Sabin, *Adult*, chapter 5, and Schelly, *The Golden Age of Comic Fandom*. See Schelly in particular for accounts of key moments in fan history, circa 1964–65 (71–97). (Schelly's history is an invaluable fund of detail and anecdote.) For a study of fandom today, see Pustz.

7. The greatest fund of detail on the history of the market can be found in the scattered writings of veteran dealer/collector Robert Beerbohm, e.g., "Unstable Equilibria" (1997) and "Secret Origins" (2000). The most trenchant analyses of the relationship between the market and comic book content are McAllister's "Cultural Argument and Organizational Constraint" (1990) and "Ownership Concentration" (2001).

8. Though many of the celebrated novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were three-deckers aimed at the circulating libraries, still the libraries' impact on literary form seems to have been neglected. I have here relied on Jacobs, "Anonymous Signatures," and Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form*.

Additional historical background on circulating libraries and novel-publishing can be found in Blakey, *The Minerva Press, 1790–1820*; Curwen, *A History of Booksellers* (1873, rpt. 1968), pages 421–432; and Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel*—the latter two concerned especially with Mudie's, the most popular and powerful of the Victorian libraries. See also Watt 1999, Cross 1985, and, for a fascinating cross-media comparison, Roehl and Varian, "Circulating Libraries and Video Rental Stores."

9. Lane's success was notorious, and his impact on popular literacy and leisure inspired severe social criticism. In Victorian England, the phrase "Minerva Press" had a pejorative potential rather like the phrase "Harlequin Romance" in our own time (Blakey 1). Like Harlequins, Minerva novels were routinely condemned as sensationalistic trash, yet faithfully read by many middle-class readers (Cross 174). Watt, in *Contesting the Gothic*, links the nineteenth-century condemnation of Minerva novels to pandemic cultural anxiety over the growth of "an undisciplined reading public," whose promiscuous consumption (and production) of genre literature was implicitly linked with "a destabilizing form of modernity"—and explicitly gendered as female (80–82). (The concern about popular literacy revealed here anticipates the concern raised in the 1940s and fifties by American comic books, only here it is feminine propriety, not childhood innocence, that is under threat.)

10. Fan historian Richard Kyle has been credited with coining, circa 1964–65, both "graphic story" and "graphic novel." In 1967, Bill Spicer's fanzine *Fantasy Illustrated*, to which Kyle contributed, became *Graphic Story Magazine*, and helped legitimize these terms (see Schelly 130; Harvey, "Novel" 104–5). George Metzger's *Beyond Time and Again* (1976), which Kyle helped publish, may have been the first book-length comic billed as a graphic novel (Rosenkranz 75; Harvey, "Novel" 106). However, Eisner's *A Contract with God*, which bore the term "graphic novel" on its cover, was the first widely recognized example of the genre and became the catalyst for general use of the term. Eisner apparently believed that he had coined a new term, out of desperation to market his book.

2. AN ART OF TENSIONS: THE OTHERNESS OF COMICS READING

1. The cinema/comics analogy, intuitive and long-lived, can be found in many of the seminal popular studies of the art form, often as part of a brief précis of formal characteristics meant to accompany an otherwise historically oriented treatment (see, e.g., Steranko 1:3; Perry 14; Horn 56–57). Ironically, Eisner himself has often been cited as the master of "cinematic" technique in comics (see, e.g., Steranko 2:116). Eisner himself told Steranko that he came to regard comics as "film on paper" but in later interviews and writings would claim theater and print as

his prime influences. In 1973 Eisner told John Benson that print “has always been the most attractive [medium] to me. . . . There’s an intimacy in reading that to me transcends motion pictures” (“Art and Commerce” 7). For a recent theoretical comparison of comics and film, see Christiansen.

2. One notable exception to this, Phyllis Hallenbeck’s 1976 article for the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (reprinted in Thomas 136–41), focuses on the use of comics to teach left-to-right sequencing and visual discrimination to students with learning disabilities. Tellingly, this article focuses on a population for whom traditional remediation strategies have proved ineffective and to whom standard expectations are assumed not to apply. Another noteworthy exception, *not* to be found in Thomas, is James W. Brown’s “Comics in the Foreign Language Classroom: Pedagogical Perspectives,” published in *Foreign Language Annals* in 1977. Brown defines comics as “a *forme mixte*, a polysemiotic genre consisting of many codes,” and pays attention to such formal elements as layout, pictorial characterization, and ballooning of text. Brown is invoked as a helpful precedent in later articles by teachers (including some reprinted in Thomas). Significantly, Brown’s work comes from an international perspective, with a substantial debt to francophone semiotics; in fact the conceptual foundation of the piece is French research from 1967 to 1976. Though Brown does emphasize the “transparency” and ease of the form, his essay exhibits little of the anxiety over comics that has so disfigured the American critical tradition.

3. Circa 1993–98, Cartier participated in a European collective known as Stakhano, dedicated to producing wordless comics albums for an international audience (see Beaty, “Stakhano”). Regarding the international reach of mute comics, see what is almost certainly the world’s largest anthology of such comics, *Comix 2000*, a millennial project assembled in 1999 by the French comics collective L’Association (J.-C. Menu, ed.) This two-thousand-page anthology of pantomime comics, wildly inconsistent, includes contributions from twenty-nine countries and more than three hundred creators.

4. “Torn Together” originally appeared as the inside front cover of issue No. 7 of Spiegelman and Mouly’s *Raw* (1985). This issue, subtitled “The Torn-Again Graphix Magazine,” had deliberately hand-torn covers (taped inside each copy was a corner torn from the cover, though not necessarily from the cover of that particular copy). Subsequent reprintings of the strip have restored the torn-off upper left corner, which Swarte has drawn to *appear* torn.

3. A BROADER CANVAS: GILBERT HERNANDEZ’S HEARTBREAK SOUP

1. Mario’s involvement with the original series was minimal after issue No. 3 (1983), but it was his initial prodding that

made *Love & Rockets* a reality. The resultant comic book, the self-published *Love & Rockets* No. 1, captured the attention of Fantagraphics Books, who offered to publish the series professionally. The Fantagraphics *L&R* began in 1982, and Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez have continued their association with Fantagraphics to the present. See Fiore, Groth, and Powers 72–74; Cooke 37–40.

2. Los Bros have acknowledged both the diversity and the zeal of their fan following. In a collaborative Gilbert/Jaime strip from 1994, hyping *Love & Rockets* in a distributor’s catalog (reprinted in *Hernandez Satyricon*), Luba boasts of the series’ “strong-willed independent women,” while a character drawn by Jaime speaks of “minorities shown in a respectful and even inspiring light.” In a more self-deprecating vein, the commemorative booklet *Ten Years of Love & Rockets* (1992) includes a strip by Jaime (also reprinted in *Satyricon*) that gently pokes fun at the readers’ strong responses to the book. Here Jaime’s principal characters, Maggie and Hopey, mouth dialogue taken from fan letters—e.g., “I think I have a crush on Maggie” and “I never thought I’d ever fall in love with a comic book character.” Such responses testify, not only to a faithful readership, but to authors who engaged that readership openly and intimately, aware that their joint creation had become a part of readers’ lives.

3. For convenience, page citations throughout this chapter generally refer not to the *Love & Rockets* magazine but to the collected, single-volume edition of *Palomar* (2003). The novel *Poison River* is an exception: since it is not included in the collected *Palomar*, I cite its definitive separate edition (1994). In all cases I have identified the original (magazine) publication dates of the stories. On occasion I have also named smaller *Love & Rockets* compilations in which certain stories can be found. Fantagraphics has published a shelf’s worth of such compilations, some twenty to date (1985–2003), which are known collectively as *The Complete Love & Rockets* or (sometimes) simply “Love & Rockets Collections.” In many cases, Los Bros substantially revised and expanded their stories for these compilations, and it is such revised, definitive versions that are gathered in the single-volume *Palomar*. (No additional changes appear to have been made for the one-volume edition.)

4. During this so-called respite, Hernandez’s exploration of high art traditions peaked in “Frida” (*L&R* No. 28, 1988, reprinted in *Flies on the Ceiling*), a short, surreal and intensely suggestive pictorial biography of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo drawing on Hayden Herrera’s *Frida* (1991). With the editorial guidance of Fantagraphics editor Kim Thompson (see Gaiman, Interview 95), Hernandez here achieves a stunning visual/verbal repartee, and reveals a contextual awareness of art and politics that portends the complexities of *Poison River*.

5. Nericcio points out that Hernandez “captures and deftly comments upon the dynamics of cinema,” and shows that these cinematic touches inform a larger critique of U.S. cultural imperialism (95). Thus, Hernandez’s movie references reveal